

## DESERT FALSE INDIGO

*Amorpha fruticosa* L.

Plant Symbol = AMFR

Contributed By: USDA NRCS National Plant Data Center



© William S. Justice  
Botany Department, Smithsonian Institution  
@ PLANTS

### Alternate Names

River-locust, false indigo, indigobush amorpha, indigobush

### Uses

*Ethnobotanic:* Resinous pustules on the plant contain amorpha, a contact and stomachic insecticide that also acts as an insect repellent (Huxley 1992). Desert false indigo also contains some indigo pigment that can be used to make blue dye.

*Landscape:* *Amorpha fruticosa* is an exotic species that is often planted as an ornamental. This shrub has an extensive root system and is also fairly wind tolerant; it can be planted as a windbreak and also to prevent soil erosion (Huxley 1992). According to Dayton, the early settlers used this shrub as a substitute for true indigo (McMinn 1939).

### Status

Please consult the Plants Web site and your State Department of Natural Resources for this plant's current status, such as, state noxious status, and wetland indicator values.

### Description

*General:* Bean family (Fabaceae). Desert false indigo is a native, deciduous shrub growing between three to ten feet high. The leaves are four to eight inches long, with eleven to twenty-five leaflets, ovate to oblong. This species is highly variable as regards to shape of the leaf and pubescence (The Great Plains Flora Association 1986). The scented flowers are purplish blue with orange anthers and occur in three to six inch long upright spikes in June (Dirr 1997). The fruits are short, smooth or hairy, glandular legumes containing a single smooth brownish seed (Freeman & Schofield 1991).

*Distribution:* Desert false indigo occurs in the foothills of the San Bernardino and San Jacinto mountains southward in the lower mountain valleys of San Diego county in the upper Sonoran Life Zone (McMinn 1939). It extends southward to Lower California and eastward to Texas and the Atlantic Coast. This species is also found from Connecticut to Minnesota, south to Florida and Louisiana (Dirr 1997). For current distribution, please consult the Plant profile page for this species on the PLANTS Web site.

### Adaptation

*Amorpha fruticosa* is commonly found on wet ground along rivers, streams, ponds, and ditches and occasionally in open wet woods (Freeman & Schofield 1991). It requires well-drained soil and can grow in nutritionally rich soil. This plant prefers acid, neutral or basic soils. It is adaptable to infertile, dry and sandy soils. Once planted, it remains for life (Dirr 1997). Utilize in dry soil and full sun where precious few plants will prosper.

### Establishment

*Propagation by Seed:* *Amorpha fruticosa* seeds should be presoaked for twelve hours in warm water and sown in the early spring in a greenhouse. The seeds normally germinate at 20°C in one to two months. When the seedlings are large enough to handle place them into individual pots and grow them in the greenhouse for their first winter. Plant them in their permanent position in the late spring or early summer.

### Management

Desert false indigo has a symbiotic relationship with certain soil bacteria. These bacteria form nodules on the roots and fix atmospheric nitrogen. The growing

plant utilizes some of this nitrogen but other plants growing nearby can also use some (Huxley 1992).

### **Cultivars, Improved and Selected Materials (and area of origin)**

Materials are available through native plant seed sources within its range.

### **References**

- Abrams, L. 1944. *Illustrated flora of the Pacific States*. Vol II. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California.
- Dirr, M.A. 1997. *Dirr's hardy trees and shrubs: an illustrated encyclopedia*. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon.
- Freeman, C.C. & E.K. Schofield 1991. *Roadside wildflowers of the Southern Great Plains*. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas.
- Genders, R. 1994. *Scented flora of the world*. Robert Hale, London.
- Hylander, C.J. 1954. *The MacMillan wildflower book*. The MacMillan Company, New York, New York.
- Huxley, A. 1992. *The new RHS dictionary of gardening*. MacMillan Press, New York, New York.
- McMinn, H.E. 1939. *An illustrated manual of California shrubs*. University of California Press, Berkeley, California.
- Sheat, W.G. 1948. *Propagation of trees, shrubs and conifers*. MacMillan & Company.
- Steyermark, J.A. 1963. *Flora of Missouri*. The Iowa State University Press, Ames, Iowa.
- The Great Plains Flora Association 1986. *Flora of the Great Plains*. University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas.

### **Prepared By**

*Lincoln M. Moore*

USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

### **Species Coordinator**

*Lincoln M. Moore*

USDA, NRCS, National Plant Data Center  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS Web site <<http://plants.usda.gov>> or the Plant Materials Program Web site <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>

*The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, sex, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Persons with disabilities who require alternative means for communication of program information (Braille, large print, audiotape, etc.) should contact USDA's TARGET Center at 202-720-2600 (voice and TDD).*

*To file a complaint of discrimination write USDA, Director, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964 (voice or TDD). USDA is an equal opportunity provider and employer.*

*Read about [Civil Rights at the Natural Resources Conservation Service](#).*