

Schinus molle—California (Peruvian) Pepper Tree

Schinus molle, The California Pepper Tree is neither Californian or a pepper tree. Many stately avenues, like Victoria Avenue are graced by the majestic, so-called California Pepper tree. The tree is easily identified by the heavy and fantastically gnarled trunk with numerous knots and rough, brown bark, the pendulous branches bearing feathery, evergreen, pale, compound leaves. They also bear cascades of droopy, rose-colored berries. This species is a member of the Cashew family (Anacardiaceae) and is native to Peru, Bolivia and Chile. It is more accurately called the Peruvian Pepper tree. The “pepper” in the name comes from the fact that when the berries, which mature in the fall and persist on the trees through the winter, are ground they give off a pungent odor similar to that of ground, black pepper. These berries are often mixed in with whole black pepper for added color. It is said that the Incas made a fermented beverage from the ground berries. However, the berries are poisonous in significant quantities and many other members of the Anacardiaceae are also poisonous or harbor chemicals that are skin irritants and cause allergic reactions, such as poison oak and poison ivy.

It is generally thought that the Spanish missionaries brought *Schinus molle* seeds into California from Mexico 200 years ago to plant on Mission grounds because they grow rapidly in full sun, poor soils and with little rainfall. The trees also withstand high winds and occasional freezing temperatures. These characteristics make the trees popular with early ranchers and other settlers in various regions of California. However, in modern urban communities, the negative attributes of this species limit its use. *Schinus molle* drops abundant litter in the form of branches, leaves and fruits. It possesses aggressive, invasive roots that crack pavement and clog sewers. It also harbors scale insects that can spread to other ornamental and fruit trees. Notwithstanding, *Schinus molle* is still an excellent choice for shade, erosion control, wind breaks and accent trees in the appropriate environments. These include large open areas with gravelly soils, such as playing fields and parks, adjacent to freeways and along rural streets with no curbs, like Victoria Avenue.

Enjoy this species on the parkways of many blocks of Victoria Avenue between Horace and Tyler, for example on the outgoing side between Adams and Gratton. While you look these trees you can contemplate the important role these rugged pioneers played in California’s early history.

Reference: Evens, M. 1976. A tree by any other name. Pa-

cific Horticulture 7:44-45.

