

# ROOT BEER PLANT

*Piper auritum*



## Characteristics

- Type: Perennial
- Zone: 8 to 12
- Sun: Partial or dappled shade
- Height: 2' – 12'
- Spread: 2' – 12'
- Leaves: Large, Fragrant, heart-shaped
- Large bush or small tree

## Culture

Root beer plant is a bold and attractive herbaceous, colony forming shrub to 8 plus feet tall. It spreads by rhizomes, often popping up away from the original plant. It has vertical rough textured stems holding aromatic heart-shaped velvety leaves that can be up to a foot long or more. In mid to late summer through fall pencil thin 6 inch long spikes bear tiny flowers which are at first upright and later gracefully drooping. They look particularly attractive against the large leaves. Plant in sun or shade and irrigate occasionally to regularly. Hardy to light frost but knocked to the ground with temperatures much below 27 °F and then comes back in the spring - it is root hardy to around 10 °F so useful in USDA Zones 8 -11

## Noteworthy Characteristics

Plant in a contained space and occasionally root prune extremities of the roots to control spread. This plant is native to from Columbia in South America through Central America and throughout much of Mexico to as far north as San Luis Potosi. The name of the genus is the Latin word for Pepper (*Piper nigrum*) and the specific epithet is from the Latin word '*auritus*' meaning "with ears", "having large ears" in reference to the shape of the base of the leaves, which is described as cordate. Root beer plants, sometimes called Mexican Pepperleaf, are primarily used as culinary ingredients, or in some areas, medicinal. However, in the United States, the FDA banned its commercial use as root beer flavoring in the 1960's, as it contains the oil safrole, which is known to be carcinogenic in animals.

## Problems

Relatively disease free.

## Garden Uses

Root beer plant may best be grown for the scent in the garden and not for culinary use. Some sources consider it to be toxic.