Leonotis leonurus (L.) R. Brown  
(Leonitis leonurus, Leonitus ocymifolia, Leonotis ocymifolia, Phlomis leonurus)  
Lion’s Paw

Other Common Names: Leonurus, Lion’s Claw, Lion’s Ear, Lion’s Tail, Wild Dagga.

Family: Lamiaceae (Labiatae).

Cold Hardiness: Generally serving as a herbaceous perennial in USDA zone 8, as a subshrub in zones 9 and 10, and as an annual in cooler regions.

Foliage: Semi-evergreen where shoots are cold hardy; opposite; simple; oblong-lanceolate to oblanceolate; 2½O to 4½O long; margins nearly entire to crenate-serrate; covered in a short white pubescence; pinnately veined; veins lightly impressed above and markedly raised beneath; base cuneate; petiole ¼O to ¾O long and pubescent; blade medium green to sage green in summer color, no fall color.

Flower: Axillary rings of bright orange to orange-red corollas surround the terminal portions of the stems and resemble outward arching lion’s claws; the two-lipped corollas can reach 1½O to 2½O in length; the upper lip is erect and curved out from the stem, the lower lip is three-lobed; flowers are highly decorative and occur in autumn when few other perennials / annuals are in peak flower.

Fruit: Four glabrous nutlets; not ornamental.

Stem / Bark: Stems — four-sided when young; sparsely branched early in the season with more lateral buds breaking as plants mature; green becoming light tan; covered in a short white hairy pubescence; Buds — folioid; ⅛O to cO long; sessile or short stalked; green; pubescent to nearly glabrous; Bark — smooth; tan to light gray.

Habit: Lion’s Paw tends to have erect, sparsely branched in the lower canopy, stems emanating from a semi-woody base; spread is equal or less than the height; where cold hardy, plants can reach 6N to 7N height; where functioning as a perennial plants or summer annuals they are usually half to two-thirds this in size.

Cultural Requirements: Easily grown; full sun is best; adapted to a variety of soil pHs, but soils should be well drained; tolerant of heat and moderate drought; tolerant of some salts in the irrigation water; mulch crowns in autumn to reduce the potential for freeze damage.

Pathological Problems: None of consequence; cold is the primary limitation to growth.

Ornamental Assets: Outstanding autumn color; flowers are effective for several weeks at a time when perennial highlights are needed.

Limitations & Liabilities: Flowering is very late in the season and the foliage is rather nondescript the rest of the growing season; the stems are frost sensitive and may be injured prior to blooming in climates with shorter growing seasons.

Landscape Utilization: Autumn color; perennial borders; cottage gardens; xeriscapes; sunny exposed locations; patio containers; possibly in medicinal or educational gardens.

Other Comments: This species was originally cultivated as a medicinal herb; the Hottentot tribesmen of South Africa utilize it as an inebriant; it has been touted by some references as a legal substitute for achieving marijuana-like effects when smoked; Leonotis leonurus is used fairly extensively in traditional Chinese and Vietnamese medicines; the active compound is an alkaloid called leonurine.; due to its widely documented medicinal properties, L. leonurus should be considered potentially poisonous; the genus name appears incorrectly as Leonitis in some references; L. ocymifolia is sometimes listed as the scientific name for this taxon, but is considered by others to be a synonym for Leonotis dysophylla G. Bentham which is a closely related species that is not as showy in flower; these two species appear to be somewhat confused in the literature, but can be distinguished by the near linear to oblanceolate leaves and darker colored flowers on L. leonurus compared to the broader ovate to cordate leaves, lighter flower color, and greater cold tolerance with L. dysophylla.

Native Habitat: South Africa.
Related Taxa: A white flowering variant, *Leonotis leonurus* (L.) R. Brown var. *albiflora* G. Bentham, occurs infrequently and is represented in the trade by primarily by the cultivar ‘Harrismith White’; although there are about thirty taxa in the genus *Leonotis* (C.H. Persoon) R. Brown, only a few others are used in cultivation; more commonly encountered are members of the closely related genus *Phlomis* L.

*Phlomis fruticosa* L.  
**Jerusalem Sage**  
C Actually a subshrub in its native Mediterranean region, *P. fruticosa* is probably best treated as a herbaceous perennial in our climate; plants are broad spreading mounds that can reach 2N to 3N (4N) in height; the 1O to 2O long leaves are opposite, ovate-lanceolate, entire to crenate, and pubescent.

C The gray-green foliage is an excellent foil for the bright yellow flowers; the flowers are very noticeable in spring and the bloom may repeat under favorable conditions.

C Jerusalem Sage is useful in USDA zones 7 through 9a(9b) as a herbaceous perennial, in cooler climates as a summer annual; although this species may not return as readily in certain locations as some other *Phlomis*, it gets my vote as most ornamental of the available taxa in the genus.

*Phlomis russeliana* (J. Sims) G. Bentham  
(Phlomis samia, *Phlomis viscosa*)  
**Russel’s Sage**  
C Also known as Greek Jerusalem Sage or Sticky Jerusalem Sage; Russel’s Sage leaves are much larger, 3O to 8O long and broadly ovate to cordate, with a dark green rugose appearance compared to *P. fruticosa*; the coarse foliage stays in more of a tight spreading mound than with *P. fruticosa* and is moderately attractive as a coarse foliar accent when not in flower; plants may slowly from colonies and function as a groundcover.

C Unfortunately, the flowering is not as spectacular as with *P. fruticosa*, but is a paler yellow or sometimes pale purplish color; the flowers of this species are borne on tall, erect, sparsely branched stalks in spring to early summer; to my liking deadheading is needed after flowering to preserve an acceptable appearance, while other authors recommend the dried flower/fruit stalks as a post-flowering asset...to each his own.

C Full sun to partial shade; appears to be adapted to a variety of soils as long as they are moderately well drained; native to Asia Minor; potentially useful in USDA zones 5 to 8 (9a).

*Phlomis tuberosa* L.  
(Phlomis glandulifera)  
**Purple Phlomis**  
C This Central and Southeast European and West Asian species is native to dry climates and well drained soils; the broad cordate leaves are coarse textured, dark green, and rugose; the species can be grown in USDA zones 7 (6) through 9a.

C Flower stalks are 2N to 4N tall, arising from low clumps of leaves in summer and are not as showy as those of *P. fruticosa*, tending to a washed out purple to pink in color; different in flower color from *P. fruticosa* and *P. russeliana*, but not overly attractive.


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