**Piper auritum** F.W.H.A. von Humboldt, A.J.A. Bonpland, & C.S. Kunth

**Root Beer Plant**

*Other Common Names:* Hojo Santa, Santa Maria, Yerba Santa.

**Family:** *Piperaceae.

**Cold Hardiness:** Hardy as a shrub or small tree only in USDA zones 10 and 11; root hardy as a returning herbaceous perennial in USDA zones 8 and 9.

**Foliage:** Evergreen in the tropics; alternate; simple; cordate to orbicular; 8 to 10 cm (12 cm) long; base cordate; margins entire or somewhat undulate; tip acuminate; velvety pubescent, more densely so beneath than above; venation pinnate; midrib light green to reddish in color, overall the leaf is pea green to medium green in color; when crushed, leaves are aromatic with a spicy root beer scent; the stout 1 to 2½ cm petioles are green with thick reddish wings.

**Flower:** Inflorescences are readily noticeable, if not particularly ornamental; 4 to 7 long rat-tail like cylindrical green spikes have white-green sessile flowers that lack a perianth; flowers are often subtended by a bract.

**Fruit:** Small green single-seeded drupe that ripens red; fleshy layer thin; rarely produced in areas where it freezes back.

**Stem / Bark:** Stems — medium to thick, but appearing thinner from a distance due to the large leaves; sparsely branched; swollen and often with reddish brown gland-like lenticels at the nodes; aromatic when crushed; Buds — foliose; green; Bark — seldom forming in our region.

**Habit:** A suckering herbaceous perennial with strongly erect 6 to 8 ft tall seldom branched stems forming a dense spreading mound in our region; in more tropical climates this species can become a small tree, to 15 ft tall.

**Cultural Requirements:** Full sun to partial shade; good garden soils, occasional fertilization, and regular irrigation will produce the most luxuriant foliage; while plants will survive in more adverse sites, growth is retarded and leaves tend to be smaller; plants are not particularly drought tolerant, but are tolerant of heat, some salts in irrigation water and soils, and a variety of soil pH; sometimes vigorous to a fault; periodic renewal pruning is needed in regions where cold does not kill the foliage.

**Pathological Problems:** No particularly troublesome insect or disease pests; leaves are sometimes feed on by various chewing insects, but they seldom require control measures.

**Ornamental Assets:** Strong tropical look and bright green coloration; root beer scent.

**Limitations & Liabilities:** Shoots are intolerant of freezing and this creates a hole in the winter garden; the species can spread aggressively in a cultivated setting.

**Landscape Utilization:** A tropical accent; nice for bold summer foliage affects; scent gardens; possibly in a large patio container.

**Other Comments:** Most portions of this plant smell strongly of root beer; some people reportedly utilize the leaves to add a root beer flavoring to various dishes or use them as wraps for cooking meats and fish (Garrett, 1996; Riffle, 1998).

**Native Habitat:** Mexico.

**Related Taxa:** A closely related species, *Piper nigrum* L. is the source of the commercial green, black, and white pepper spices; anyone interested in the history and lore of these spices should consult Swahn (1991).

**References:** Garrett, 1996; Riffle, 1998; Swahn, 1991.

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