

Leonotis leonurus (L.) R. Brown

Lion's Paw

(*Leonitis leonurus*, *Leonitus ocymifolia*, *Leonotis ocymifolia*, *Phlomis leonurus*)

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; 2½Oto 4½Olong; 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 ¼Oto ¾Olong 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 1½Oto 2½Oin 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 — foliose; 1/16 Oto 1/8Olong; 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 6Nto 7Nin 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 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 10 to 20 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, 30 to 80 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 form 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.

References: Clausen and Ekstrom, 1989; Cooke, 1998; Hogue, 1999; Jelitto and Schacht, 1990; Mulligan, 1992; Phillips and Rix, 1991; Still, 1994.