

# Identification of prickly bushes

Prickly acacia (*Vachellia nilotica*), Mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.),  
Parkinsonia (*Parkinsonia aculeata*), Mimosa bush (*Vachellia farnesiana*)



Prickly acacia



Mesquite



Parkinsonia



Mimosa bush

Four prickly leguminous bushes or trees are woody weeds of western Queensland. Because two or more are often present in the same area, land managers should correctly identify them before considering control measures.

With practice, mature plants of the four species can often be recognised from a distance by their overall shape and sometimes their foliage colour.

However, because many trees are not the 'standard' shape or colour, quick visual identifications from afar are not always correct. All four species produce thorns, yellow flowers and bean-like seed pods. For positive identification a plant must be examined closely.



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## Description

### Prickly acacia

#### Category 3 restricted invasive plant

Prickly acacia (*Vachellia nilotica*) is a thorny tree that can grow up to 10 m high but usually grows to about 4–5 m high. It has fern-like leaves, as does mimosa bush and mesquite. Prickly acacia is usually single stemmed unless damaged by fire or frost, when it will become multi-stemmed at the base. The flowers are ball-shaped, golden yellow and about 1 cm across.

The pods are usually 10–15 cm, flattish, have constrictions between the seeds and are greyish when ripe. Young plants are very thorny but older plants tend to lose most thorns. The thorns are in pairs along the stem and are usually 1–5 cm long.

### Mesquite

#### Prohibited and category 3 restricted invasive plant

Mesquites (*Prosopis* spp.) are the most variable in size, shape and foliage colour of the four woody weeds described in this fact sheet. This is because more than one species is covered by the common name of mesquite: *Prosopis pallida*, *Prosopis glandulosa*, *Prosopis velutina* and a hybrid mesquite (*Prosopis* spp. hybrid).

Mesquites are thorny, usually spreading trees growing up to 15 m high. They were favoured historically as shade trees and are often found around homesteads and stockyards. Depending on the species, they can have a multi-stemmed shrubby habit with branches drooping to ground level or are single stemmed trees with spreading canopies.

The foliage is usually green but can vary to blue-green. The twigs are smooth, often with dark red or green bark, and zigzagged with straight, stout pairs of thorns usually 1–3 cm long. Overall, trees appear rather untidy with individual zigzagged twigs protruding beyond the main canopy. They are not as neat in appearance as prickly acacia.

The greenish-cream flower is 5–8 cm long, and cylindrical (described as ‘lamb’s tail’). The pods are 10–20 cm long, straight to slightly curved, smooth, with slight constrictions between the seeds, and straw coloured when ripe. In some species the pods may be purplish.

### Parkinsonia

#### Category 3 restricted invasive plant

Parkinsonia (*Parkinsonia aculeata*) is a thorny shrub or small tree which can grow up to 10 m high and can be either single or multi-stemmed. The leaves are different to the fern-like leaves of prickly acacia, mimosa bush and mesquite. They consist of a flattened leaf stalk up to 30 cm long with tiny oblong leaflets in rows along each side. Sharp, recurved thorns up to 1 cm long are found on the stem at the base of each leaf.

The stems, branches and often the trunk of parkinsonia are characteristically green. Perfumed flowers are yellow, except one of the five petals has an orange spot or is completely orange. Flowers are arranged in drooping sprays about 20 cm long. The pods are straight, 5–10 cm long, straw to brown coloured, with long constrictions between the seeds.

### Mimosa bush

#### Invasive plant

Mimosa bush (*Vachellia farnesiana*) is a rounded shrub that grows up to 3 m high, although it occasionally grows into trees up to 5 m high. It has fern-like type leaves, which are sometimes more of a yellowish green than the pure green of prickly acacia. The plant is nearly always multi-stemmed. The flowers are identical to those of prickly acacia except that they are sometimes more orange in colour.

The pods grow up to 6 cm long, are cigar shaped, slightly curved, and brown to black when ripe. The thorns are similar to those of prickly acacia.

## Distinguishing characteristics

Fortunately, the four prickly bushes or trees can be easily distinguished, as follows:

- parkinsonia has leaves that are a flattened green leaf stalk with small leaflets moderately spaced along each side. The other three weeds all have fern-like type leaves
- mesquites are easily distinguished from prickly acacia and mimosa bush by the flowers—‘lamb’s tail’ for mesquite versus small round flowers for the other two
- prickly acacia and mimosa bush are easily distinguished by their seed pods—constrictions between the seeds for prickly acacia versus a cylindrical pod for mimosa bush.

If there are no flowers, pods alone can be used to distinguish mesquites, prickly acacia and mimosa bush.

- If there are no flowers or pods, bark colour can be used, with some expertise.
- Parkinsonia plants of all ages have green bark.
- The young bark of mesquite is often green and/or dark red.
- The young bark of prickly acacia has a tinge of orange or green.
- In mimosa bush, the young bark is grey with white spots.

## More information

For more information contact your local government or visit [biosecurity.qld.gov.au](http://biosecurity.qld.gov.au).

**Table 1. Some characteristics to distinguish between the prickle bushes**

Characteristic	Prickly acacia	Mesquite	Parkinsonia	Mimosa bush
Pod shape	Up to 23 cm long with constrictions between seeds	Up to 20 cm long, slight constrictions between seeds; straight or slightly curved	Up to 10 cm long, long thin constrictions between seeds; straight	Cigar-shaped, up to 6 cm long and slightly curved
Flowers	Ball-shaped, golden yellow, about 1 cm across	Greenish-cream flower spike, 5–8 cm long and cylindrical in shape	Five petals mainly yellow except one which has an orange spot	Ball-shaped, golden yellow, about 1 cm across
Pod colour, hairiness	Blue-grey, fine hairs	Straw coloured, sometimes purple; no hairs	Straw coloured; no hairs	Brown to black; no hairs
Leaves	Fern-like, 4–10 pairs, often overlapping	Fern-like; 1–3 pairs, often with a gap between each leaf	A long, flattened leaf stalk with tiny oblong leaflets along each side	Fern-like; 2–4 pairs, with a gap between each leaf
Leaflets	10–25 pairs of leaflets	10 to 14 pairs or leaflets		8–18 pairs of leaflets
Tree shape	Spreading tree up to 10 m high	Variable shape, usually a spreading tree up to 15 m high	Small tree or shrub usually up to 5 m high	Usually rounded shrub up to 3 m high
Bark	Saplings have orange and/or green tinge Mature trees have dark rough bark	Bark rough, grey; smooth dark red or green on small branches	Smooth and green, straw coloured and lightly textured at base of older trees	Grey with prominent white spots
Branch shape	More or less straight	Zigzag shaped	Slightly zigzagged	Zigzag shaped

## Identification of prickly bushes – flowers



Prickly acacia



Mesquite



Parkinsonia



Mimosa bush

## Identification of prickly bushes – pods



Prickly acacia



Mesquite



Parkinsonia



Mimosa bush

Fact sheets are available from [biosecurity.qld.gov.au](http://biosecurity.qld.gov.au). The control methods recommended should be used in accordance with the restrictions (federal and state legislation, and local government laws) directly or indirectly related to each control method. These restrictions may prevent the use of one or more of the methods referred to, depending on individual circumstances. While every care is taken to ensure the accuracy of this information, the department does not invite reliance upon it, nor accept responsibility for any loss or damage caused by actions based on it.

