

Firmiana simplex: Chinese Parasoltree¹

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson²

Introduction

Chinese Parasoltree has a very unusual appearance for a deciduous tree, having green stems and bark and extremely large, three to five-lobed bright green leaves. Most people either love it or hate it due to its striking habit and coarse texture. Each leaf is up to 12 inches across and casts as much shade as an actual parasol. Chinese Parasoltree has a dense, upright, oval canopy and reaches 35 to 50 feet in height, spreading 15 to 20 feet. In June or July, 10 to 20-inch-long, upright, loose, terminal panicles of yellow/green blooms appear and are followed by the production of peculiar pods which split open into four petal-like sections to reveal the small, round seeds. These pods are often harvested for use in winter decorations. The foliage of Chinese Parasoltree can turn brilliant yellow before dropping in fall to reveal an interesting branching structure of green stems. The yellow complements the green trunk very nicely.

General Information

Scientific name: *Firmiana simplex*

Pronunciation: fer-mee-AY-nuh SIM-plecks

Common name(s): Chinese Parasoltree, Japanese Varnish-Tree

Family: *Sterculiaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 7A through 9B (Fig. 2)

Origin: not native to North America

Invasive potential: invasive non-native

Uses: specimen; highway median; shade

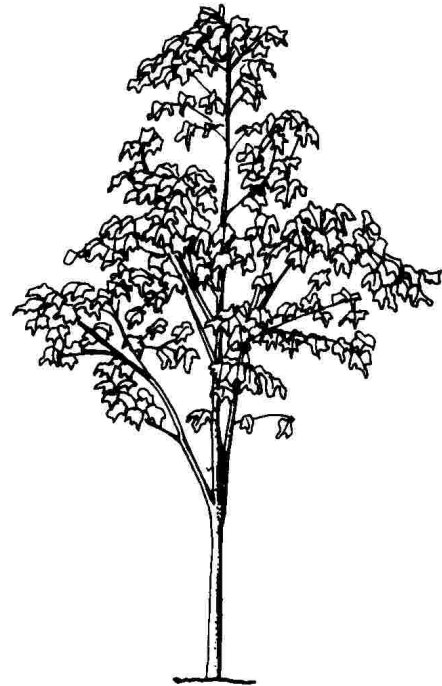


Figure 1. Young *Firmiana simplex*: Chinese Parasoltree

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

Description

Height: 30 to 50 feet

Spread: 15 to 30 feet

Crown uniformity: irregular

Crown shape: upright/erect, oval

Crown density: moderate

1. This document is ENH418, one of a series of the Environmental Horticulture, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date November 1993. Revised December 2006. Reviewed May 2011. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

2. Edward F. Gilman, professor, Environmental Horticulture Department; Dennis G. Watson, former associate professor, Agricultural Engineering Department, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.



Figure 2. Range

Growth rate: fast

Texture: coarse

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: lobed, undulate

Leaf shape: star-shaped

Leaf venation: palmate

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaf blade length: 4 to 8 inches, 8 to 12 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: yellow

Fall characteristic: showy

Flower

Flower color: yellow, white/cream/gray

Flower characteristics: showy

Fruit

Fruit shape: elongated, oval

Fruit length: less than .5 inch

Fruit covering: dry or hard

Fruit color: green, tan

Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: branches don't droop; showy; typically one trunk; thorns

Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure

Breakage: susceptible to breakage

Current year twig color: gray, green

Current year twig thickness: thick

Wood specific gravity: unknown

Culture

Light requirement: full sun, partial sun or partial shade

Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; acidic; alkaline; well-drained

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: unknown

Other

Roots: can form large surface roots

Winter interest: yes

Outstanding tree: yes

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown

Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases

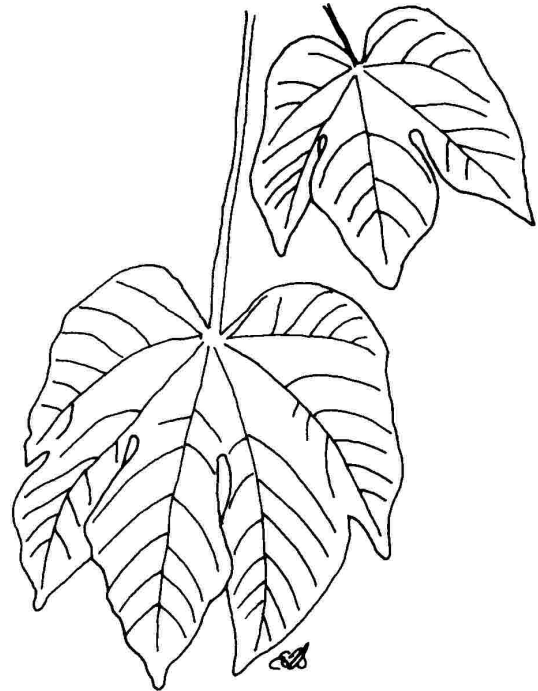


Figure 3. Foliage

Use and Management

The tree appears “out of place” to some horticulturists but many people enjoy the dramatic impact one or several of these trees can have on a landscape. The tree lends a tropical effect and is probably best used only occasionally as a specimen. It could be tried as a street tree on a small scale but may be objectionable due to the so-called messy nature of the tree. Leaves are large, decompose slowly and blow around in the landscape after they fall. Falling fruits also contribute to the mess but they are dry. The tree looks a bit scraggly in winter with old flower stalks persisting on the branch tips. There is a tree in Raleigh, North Carolina which is 45 feet tall with an 18-inch-diameter trunk and still growing. But on many sites, count on about 30-years of

service unless located in an area with lots of soil space and pruned regularly to develop good form.

Branches can be poorly attached to the trunk so be sure that branches grow no larger than about half the diameter of the trunk. This will help ensure a stronger attachment to the tree. Roots often grow close to the surface in clay soil especially near the trunk.

Chinese Parasol tree should be grown a full-sun, wind-protected location. Trees will grow in shade with an upright, almost columnar form as they reach for the sunlight. Trees should be regularly watered when young but become drought-tolerant once established. They tolerate clay soil but often develop root rot if the soil is not well-drained. Not a downtown tree.

The cultivar 'Variegata' has green and white-dappled leaves. Rare in the nursery trade.

Propagation is by seed.

Pests and Diseases

A trunk scale may kill a tree if not controlled.