Illicium anisatum Japanese Anise Tree

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Introduction

Illicium anisatum is an upright, rounded, bushy shrub or small tree that attains a height of 10 to 15 feet (Fig. 1). The foliage of this plant is exceptional. In contrast to Illicium parviflorum and Illicium floridanum, the evergreen leaves of Illicium anisatum are a lustrous medium to dark green color with undulate margins. All anise leaves smell a little like root beer when they are crushed. Leaves of anise tree are generally 2 to 4 inches long, a little smaller than those on the other two species. Many yellowish-white or greenish-white flowers, with up to 30 petals, are produced in spring. These axillary flowers are star-shaped and have no fragrance, but can be showy if you are close to the plant. They are produced in abundance in some years. The fruits of the anise tree are star-shaped follicles that eventually release dark brown seeds.

General Information

Scientific name: Illicium anisatum
Pronunciation: ill-LISS-ee-um an-niss-SAY-tum
Common name(s): Japanese anise tree
Family: Illiciaceae
Plant type: tree
USDA hardiness zones: 8 through 10 (Fig. 2)
Planting month for zone 7: year round
Planting month for zone 8: year round
Planting month for zone 9: year round
Planting month for zone 10: year round
Origin: not native to North America
Uses: hedge; espalier; screen; foundation; border
Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the plant

Figure 1. Japanese anise tree.

Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.
**Description**

Height: 10 to 15 feet  
Spread: 8 to 15 feet  
Plant habit: oval  
Plant density: dense  
Growth rate: moderate  
Texture: medium

**Foliage**

Leaf arrangement: alternate  
Leaf type: simple  
Leaf margin: undulate  
Leaf shape: ovate  
Leaf venation: none, or difficult to see  
Leaf type and persistence: fragrant  
Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches  
Leaf color: green  
Fall color: no fall color change  
Fall characteristic: not showy

**Flower**

Flower color: yellow  
Flower characteristic: pleasant fragrance; summer flowering

**Fruit**

Fruit shape: irregular  
Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch  
Fruit cover: dry or hard  
Fruit color: green  
Fruit characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

**Trunk and Branches**

Trunk/bark/branches: typically multi-trunked or clumping stems; can be trained to grow with a short, single trunk; not particularly showy  
Current year stem/twig color: green  
Current year stem/twig thickness: medium

**Culture**

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun  
Soil tolerances: acidic; slightly alkaline; sand; loam; clay;  
Drought tolerance: moderate  
Soil salt tolerances: poor  
Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

**Other**

Roots: usually not a problem  
Winter interest: no special winter interest  
Outstanding plant: not particularly outstanding  
Invasive potential: not known to be invasive  
Pest resistance: no serious pests are normally seen on the plant

**Use and Management**

This plant is most useful as the base green mass in a shrub border. Its large size makes it well suited for creating a screen to maintain a visual and noise barrier. The anise tree is ideal for shady natural areas and may also be used for foundation plantings if you do not mind the regular clipping that will be needed to maintain it as a hedge. Some people have trained them into small trees for planting near a patio or deck.

_Illicium anisatum_ is adaptable, growing in a full sun to mostly shaded location in the landscape and performs best on a moist, well-drained, rich soil. It is moderately tolerant of drought but has a low salt spray tolerance. Annual pruning may be necessary if one is attempting to maintain this plant as a shrub. Little fertilizer appears to be necessary to maintain good foliage color and growth in the landscape.

There is a white flowered form of the plant available at some garden centers. Propagate the anise tree by seed, semi-ripe cuttings, or by simple layering.

**Pests and Diseases**

No pests or diseases are of major concern. Mites and scales may be troublesome on occasion.