**Ptelea trifoliata**: Common Hoptree

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson

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**Introduction**

This deciduous North American native tree reaches about 15 feet in height with a spread of 10 to 15 feet and forms a broad, rounded canopy over a slender, grey trunk. The trifoliate, four to six-inch-long leaves are shiny and dark green on top, pale and hairy below, turning yellow in fall before dropping. Inconspicuous greenish-white flowers appear in terminal clusters in June and July, their presence easily detected by the delicious orange blossom-like perfume. The blooms are followed by interesting, one-inch-diameter, flattened, tan “wafers” which will persist on the tree if not first consumed by wildlife. In the past, this bitter fruit was used as a substitute for hops in brewing beer.

**General Information**

- **Scientific name**: *Ptelea trifoliata*
- **Pronunciation**: TEE-lee-uh try-fole-ee-AY-tuh
- **Common name(s)**: Common Hoptree, Wafer-Ash
- **Family**: Rutaceae
- **USDA hardiness zones**: 4A through 9A (Fig. 2)
- **Origin**: native to North America
- **Invasive potential**: little invasive potential
- **Uses**: specimen; deck or patio; container or planter
- **Availability**: not native to North America

**Description**

- **Height**: 5 to 15 feet
- **Spread**: 10 to 15 feet
- **Crown uniformity**: irregular
- **Crown shape**: round, vase
- **Crown density**: moderate

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**Foliage**

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)
Leaf type: trifoliate, odd-pinnately compound
Leaf margin: entire, serrate
Leaf shape: elliptic (oval), obovate, ovate
Leaf venation: brachidodrome, pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: yellow
Fall characteristic: showy

**Flower**

Flower color: white/cream/gray
Flower characteristics: not showy

**Fruit**

Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch
Fruit covering: dry or hard
Fruit color: brown
Fruit characteristics: attracts squirrels/mammals; showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem

**Trunk and Branches**

Trunk/bark/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically multi-trunked; thorns
Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure
Breakage: resistant
Current year twig color: brown
Current year twig thickness: medium
Wood specific gravity: unknown

**Culture**

Light requirement: full sun, partial sun or partial shade, shade tolerant
Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; acidic; slightly alkaline; well-drained

**Drought tolerance**: high
**Aerosol salt tolerance**: unknown

**Other**

Roots: not a problem
Winter interest: no
Outstanding tree: yes
Ozone sensitivity: unknown
Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown
Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases

**Use and Management**

One of a few small trees which performs well in deep shade. Plant it close to the patio or deck, or locate it in a shrub border for fragrant flowers and yellow fall color display. Its native habitat is dry, rocky upland sites making it well-suited for unirrigated landscapes.

Naturally found in the shade along the edges of woods, especially on rocky slopes in the Mississippi Valley, Wafer-Ash can be planted in full sun to deep shade and prefers well-drained, fertile, moist soil. While plants are better off if not exposed to extremes of wetness or dryness, Wafer-Ash is drought-tolerant once established. It transplants readily from the field.

Cultivars include: ‘Aurea’, new leaves bright yellow fading to pale green; and ‘Glaucu’, blue/green foliage.

Propagation is by seed, budding, layering, or grafting.

**Pests and Diseases**

No pests or diseases are of major concern although it is occasionally bothered by tree-hoppers, leaf spot, and rust. Tree hoppers can discolour the foliage and cause premature defoliation.