UF IFAS Extension UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

ENH323

Chorisia speciosa: Silk-Floss Tree[1]

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Introduction

This rounded, deciduous tree eventually has wide-spreading branches, which are green when young and covered with spines, often becoming grey and sometimes losing their coarse, sharp spines. Young trees can have a columnar or upright form. The spiny trunk is unusually thick and remains green even on older trees. Silk-floss tree can reach 50 feet in height with an equal or greater spread, and grows rapidly the first few years, then more slowly. Some trees maintain a relatively narrow crown with one straight trunk while others are wide-spreading, particularly on older specimens. The large, showy, pink and white, five-petaled flowers, which somewhat resemble narrow-petaled hibiscus, are produced in small clusters in fall and winter (usually October) when the tree is nearly bare. The fruits are large, 8-inch-long, pear-shaped, woody capsules, filled with silky, white, kapok-like floss and pea-like seeds. Floss from the seeds was used for stuffing pillows, and thin strips of the bark have been used to make rope.

General Information

Scientific name: *Chorisia speciosa*
Pronunciation: koe-RIZZ-ee-uh spee-see-OH-suh
Common name(s): Silk-floss tree
Family: *Bombacaceae*
USDA hardiness zones: 9B through 11 (Figure 2)
Origin: native to Brazil and Argentina
UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: not considered a problem species at this time, may be recommended (North, Central, South)
Uses: shade; specimen; street without sidewalk; highway median

Figure 1. Full Form—*Chorisia speciosa*: Silk-floss tree

Description

Height: 35 to 50 feet
Spread: 40 to 55 feet
Crown uniformity: irregular
Crown shape: upright/erect, round, pyramidal
Crown density: moderate
Growth rate: fast
Texture: coarse

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Figure 2. Range

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate
Leaf type: palmately compound; made up of 5 to 7 leaflets
Leaf margin: serrate
Leaf shape: elliptic to lanceolate
Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: leaflets are 3 to 5 inches
Leaf color: green on top, paler green underneath
Fall color: no color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Figure 3. Leaf—*Chorisia speciosa*: Silk-floss tree

Flower

Flower color: pink and white
Flower characteristics: very showy; emerges in clusters
Flowering: late fall to early winter

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval, round
Fruit length: 8 inches
Fruit covering: dry or hard; woody, pear-shaped capsule
Fruit color: green to brown when ripe
Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; showy; fruit/leaves not a litter problem

Figure 4. Flower—*Chorisia speciosa*: Silk-floss tree

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches don't droop; very showy; typically one trunk; thorns
Bark: pale green, smooth, and bears cone-shaped thorns
Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure
Breakage: resistant
Current year twig color: green
Current year twig thickness: medium
Wood specific gravity: unknown

Figure 5. Bark, Thornless—*Chorisia speciosa*: Silk-floss tree

Figure 6. Bark, Thorny—*Chorisia speciosa*: Silk-floss tree
Credits: Gritta Hasing

Culture

Light requirement: full sun
Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; alkaline; acidic; well-drained to occasionally wet
Drought tolerance: high
Aerosol salt tolerance: low

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

Use and Management

An excellent specimen tree for parks, parking lots, and other large landscapes, silk-floss tree is spectacular when in bloom, producing an outstanding show of color in the fall. Large roots often form at the base of the trunk just beneath the soil, so be careful not to plant the tree too close to sidewalks or pavement. Fifteen feet from curbs, driveways, and sidewalks should be adequate.

Prune the tree to be sure that only one central trunk develops when the tree is young. The central leader becomes less vigorous in middle age, allowing lateral limbs to develop into the main structure of the tree and produce a spreading form. Although most branches are horizontal and well attached to the tree, upright branches can develop with embedded bark that can cause a branch to split from the trunk. Prevent this by pruning the major limbs so they remain less than half the diameter of the trunk.

Flowering best in full sun, silk-floss tree will thrive on any reasonably fertile soil with good drainage. It is not salt tolerant but does tolerate high pH. Grafted trees are preferred as they bloom earlier and at a smaller size.

Two grafted selections are available: 'Majestic Beauty' has rich pink flowers, and 'Los Angeles Beautiful' has wine red flowers. The cultivar 'Monsa' has a thornless trunk and pink fall flowers.

Propagation is by seed or grafting.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern.

References

Koeser, A. K., Hasing, G., Friedman, M. H., and Irving, R. B. 2015. *Trees: North & Central Florida*. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

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