

Clusia rosea: Pitch Apple¹

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Introduction

This wide-spreading, densely-foliated, rounded, 25- to 30-foot-tall, evergreen tree has a short trunk and broad, thickened, dark green, leathery leaves, reminiscent of Southern magnolia leaves. It is, in fact, greatly admired in Cuba and the Virgin Islands as an ornamental. Leaves can be written on with a fingernail. In summer, the showy, pink and white, 2- to 3-inch flowers appear at night and sometimes remain open all morning on overcast days. They appear near the branch tips and are followed by a fleshy, light green, poisonous fruit, 3-inches in diameter. These persistent fruits turn black when ripe and split open, revealing bright red seeds surrounded by a black, resinous material. The seeds are very attractive to birds and other wildlife and they germinate readily in the landscape and surrounding areas. The black material surrounding these seeds was once used to caulk the seams of boats, hence its common name, 'Pitch-apple'.

General Information

Scientific name: *Clusia rosea*

Pronunciation: KLOO-see-uh ROE-zee-uh

Common name(s): Pitch apple, Florida clusia

Family: Clusiaceae

USDA hardiness zones: 10B through 11 (Figure 2)

Origin: native to Florida, the West Indies, and from Mexico to northern South America

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: native

Uses: trained as a standard; reclamation; street without sidewalk; screen; specimen; espalier; deck or patio; parking lot island < 100 sq ft; parking lot island 100–200 sq ft; parking lot island > 200 sq ft; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); tree lawn 3–4 feet wide; tree lawn 4–6 feet wide; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; urban tolerant; shade; highway median; hedge; container or planter



Figure 1. Full Form—*Clusia rosea*: Pitch-apple

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Description

Height: 25 to 30 feet

Spread: 15 to 25 feet

Crown uniformity: symmetrical

Crown shape: round, spreading

Crown density: dense

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: coarse

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: opposite/subopposite

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: obovate

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: broadleaf evergreen, evergreen

Leaf blade length: 3 to 6 inches

Leaf color: dull green on top, yellow green underneath

Fall color: no color change

Fall characteristic: not showy



Figure 3. Leaf—*Clusia rosea*: Pitch-apple

Flower

Flower color: pink and white

Flower characteristics: showy; emerges at branch tips

Flowering: primarily summer, but also year-round

Fruit

Fruit shape: round, capsule

Fruit length: 3 inches

Fruit covering: fleshy drupe; splits open to reveal red seeds and orange arils

Fruit color: light green, turns black at maturity

Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; not showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem



Figure 4. Flower—*Clusia rosea*: Pitch-apple



Figure 5. Fruit—*Clusia rosea*: Pitch-apple

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns

Bark: gray brown and mostly smooth, with a slightly warty texture

Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: green

Current year twig thickness: thick

Wood specific gravity: unknown

Culture

Light requirement: full sun to partial shade

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

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: high



Figure 6. Bark, Young—*Clusia rosea*: Pitch-apple



Figure 7. Bark, Mature—*Clusia rosea*: Pitch-apple
Credits: Gritta Hasing

Other

Roots: not a problem

Winter interest: no

Outstanding tree: yes

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown

Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases

Use and Management

Growing well in full sun to dappled shade, pitch apple tolerates many different soil types but grows most rapidly on moist soils. It is quite tolerant of light open sands and salt spray, making it ideal for seaside locations. Pitch apple is often used as a screen due to its low spreading habit and is ideal for espalier to cool building walls in the summer. Some maintenance is required to trim prop roots and aerial roots as they form from the trunk base and lower branches, or the tree could take over an area. Otherwise, it is a low-maintenance tree. With lower branches removed, it can make an attractive, small to moderately-sized street tree, although some people object to the falling fruits and thick slowly decomposing leaves. A patio can be kept cooler with a pitch apple which creates a dense shade. Plants should be watered well until established and then trees develop rapidly.

Purchase trees which have been trained in the nursery to one central leader for street tree use. Those grown for specimen use with several upright trunks are not suited for streets, as vehicle clearance will be difficult to maintain and trees will be less durable.

The cultivar with marbled leaves, *Clusia rosea* 'Variegata', has unusual and very striking, yellow and green variegated foliage.

Propagation is by seeds or cuttings.

Pests

Scale.

Diseases

No diseases are of major concern.

Reference

Koeser, A.K., Friedman, M.H., Hasing, G., Finley, H., Schelb, J. 2017. *Trees: South Florida and the Keys*. Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.