

Crescentia cujete: Calabash¹

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Introduction

Calabash is an evergreen tree reaching 10 to 25 feet in height with a broad, irregular crown composed of long, spreading branches clothed in 2- to 7-inch-long dark green leaves, which create moderate shade beneath the tree. Calabash is most outstanding in the landscape for its year-round production of flowers and fruit, both of which are unusual. The 2 ¼-inch-wide flowers are greenish white to greenish yellow with purple streaks, bell-shaped, and appear to emerge directly from the branches. These are followed by the emergence of the large, round fruit, 4 to 12 inches in diameter, with a smooth, hard shell, which hang directly beneath the branches. Fruits are poisonous.

General Information

Scientific name: *Crescentia cujete*

Pronunciation: kress-EN-tee-uh koo-JEE-tee

Common name(s): Calabash

Family: *Bignoniaceae*

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

Origin: native to Central and South America

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: not considered a problem species at this time, may be recommended (North, Central, South)

Uses: specimen; deck or patio; street without sidewalk; tree lawn > 6 ft wide; tree lawn 4–6 feet wide; tree lawn 3–4 feet wide; highway median



Figure 1. Full Form—*Crescentia cujete*: Calabash

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Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 10 to 25 feet

Spread: 20 to 30 feet

Crown uniformity: irregular

Crown shape: spreading, round

Crown density: open

Growth rate: moderate

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: obovate

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: evergreen

Leaf blade length: 2 to 7 inches

Leaf color: dark green and shiny on top, paler green underneath

Fall color: no color change

Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: greenish white to greenish yellow with purple streaks

Flower characteristics: showy; emerges singly from the trunk and branches; described as having an unpleasantly pungent aroma

Flowering: year-round

Fruit

Fruit shape: round to elliptic

Fruit length: 4 to 12 inches

Fruit covering: fleshy; hard-shelled berry

Fruit color: turns from green to yellow when ripe

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

Fruiting: year-round



Figure 3. Leaf—*Crescentia cujete*: Calabash



Figure 4. Flower—*Crescentia cujete*: Calabash



Figure 5. Fruit—*Crescentia cujete*: Calabash

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches droop; showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns

Bark: gray to brown and smooth, becoming scaly and fissured with age

Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: unknown

Current year twig thickness: medium, thick

Wood specific gravity: unknown



Figure 6. Bark—*Crescentia cujete*: Calabash

Credits: Gitta Hasing

Culture

Light requirement: full sun

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

Drought tolerance: moderate

Aerosol salt tolerance: none

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

Calabash should be grown in full sun on any well-drained soil.

The main limbs on calabash originate close to the ground forming a low-branched tree without training or pruning. These limbs branch infrequently, forming a heavy, awkward-looking canopy. This is suitable for planting in an open area where there is plenty of space. Prune the tips of the branches regularly when the tree is young to develop more secondary branches close to the trunk. This will help increase the diameter of the main branches and thicken the canopy. The trunk can be trained straight by staking, and lateral branches directed to grow upright.

Propagation is by seed.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern but occasionally bothered by Chinese rose beetles and a leaf-webbing caterpillar.

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.