

Manilkara zapota: Sapodilla¹

Edward F. Gilman, Dennis G. Watson, Ryan W. Klein, Andrew K. Koeser, Deborah R. Hilbert, and Drew C. McLean²

Introduction

A superb shade, street (where falling fruit will not be a problem), or fruit tree, sapodilla reaches a height of 60 feet with a 45-foot spread. The smooth, dark, and glossy, five-inch-long evergreen leaves are clustered at the tips of twigs and the small, cream-colored solitary flowers appear in the leaf axils throughout the year. The four-inch-wide, scurfy brown fruits have a juicy, sweet, yellow-brown flesh and ripen to softness in spring and summer. The flower-to-fruit period is about ten months. The bark and branches, when injured, bleed a white latex which is the source of chicle, the original base for chewing gum. The trunk on older specimens is flaky and quite attractive, and flares at the base into numerous surface roots.

General Information

Scientific name: *Manilkara zapota*

Pronunciation: man-ill-KAR-uh zuh-POE-tuh

Common name(s): sapodilla

Family: *Sapotaceae*

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

Origin: native to Mexico and Central America

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

Uses: hedge; shade; fruit; street without sidewalk; specimen; highway median; screen



Figure 1. Full Form - *Manilkara zapota*: sapodilla
Credits: UF/IFAS

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2. Edward F. Gilman, professor emeritus, Environmental Horticulture Department; Dennis G. Watson, former associate professor, Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering Department; Ryan W. Klein, graduate assistant, Environmental Horticulture Department; Andrew K. Koeser, assistant professor, Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center; Deborah R. Hilbert, graduate assistant, Environmental Horticulture Department, GCREC; and Drew C. McLean, biological scientist, Environmental Horticulture Department, GCREC; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

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Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 40 to 60 feet
Spread: 35 to 45 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical
Crown shape: pyramidal, round
Crown density: dense
Growth rate: moderate
Texture: coarse

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate but appears whorled near branch tips
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: entire
Leaf shape: elliptic



Figure 3. Leaf - *Manilkara zapota*: sapodilla
 Credits: UF/IFAS

Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: evergreen, broadleaf evergreen
Leaf blade length: 2 to 5 inches
Leaf color: emerge pinkish and then turn dark green on top and paler green underneath
Fall color: no color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: cream-colored
Flower characteristics: not showy; bell-shaped; fragrant; emerges solitary or in clusters from leaf axils near branch tips
Flowering: year-round



Figure 4. Flower - *Manilkara zapota*: sapodilla
 Credits: UF/IFAS

Fruit

Fruit shape: round to oval
Fruit length: 2 to 4 inches
Fruit covering: scurfy; fleshy berry
Fruit color: brown
Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; not showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem
Fruiting: ripens in spring and summer



Figure 5. Fruit - *Manilkara zapota*: sapodilla
Credits: UF/IFAS

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches don't droop; showy; typically one trunk; no thorns

Bark: light brown and striated, becoming dark brown and deeply furrowed with age

Pruning requirement: little required

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: green, brown

Current year twig thickness: medium

Wood specific gravity: unknown

Culture

Light requirement: full sun

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

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: high

Other

Roots: can form large surface roots

Winter interest: no

Outstanding tree: no

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown

Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases



Figure 6. Bark - *Manilkara zapota*: sapodilla
Credits: Gitta Hasing, UF/IFAS

Use and Management

Requiring full sun for best growth and form, sapodilla is a tough tree tolerating a variety of poor soils but will grow better on well-drained soils. It has a good salt tolerance and is very drought and wind-resistant, enduring hurricanes very well. Thinning the very dense crown will help to increase grass and other plant growth beneath the crown and increase wind tolerance. These traits make it ideal for seaside locations. The trunk and roots grow quite large on older specimens, so locate no closer than about eight to ten feet from sidewalks and curbs. It makes a superb specimen tree for a large residential landscape or commercial landscape.

A central trunk often develops with little training. It dominates the young tree forming a pyramidal-shaped canopy. Improper pruning practices such as topping, forms many clustered leaders and can shorten the life of the tree.

Superior fruit cultivars are available: 'Prolific', 'Brown Sugar', 'Modello', and 'Russel'. *Manilkara bahamensis*, the wild dilly, is native to the Florida Keys and has less desirable fruit.

Propagation is usually by seed, with superior varieties being veneer-grafted.

Pests

Scales and fruit flies occasionally cause problems. Seedlings develop in the landscape where they could become a slight weed problem.

Reference

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