

Triadica sebifera: Chinese Tallow Tree¹

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Introduction

With oval, pointed, deciduous leaves and an oval, open canopy, Chinese tallow tree creates soft, dappled shade. The trunk normally dominates, snaking up through the crown sporting major limbs well-spaced along the trunk. Enough light will penetrate to allow lawn grasses to thrive beneath this rapidly-growing, 20- to 50-foot-tall tree. Yellow, terminal flower spikes appear in spring and are followed by brown capsules which burst and fall off, leaving behind wax-coated, white, berrylike seeds, hence the common name, popcorn tree. These berries persist throughout the winter, even after the fluttering, heart-shaped leaves have turned gorgeous autumn shades of reddish purple and have fallen. Tallow tree is one of the only reliable fall coloring trees for USDA hardiness zones 8b and 9a. The new growth in spring is red-tinged. The waxy coating on the seeds is extracted by the Chinese for use in candles and soap and the milky sap inside the twigs is poisonous.

General Information

Scientific name: *Triadica sebifera*

Pronunciation: try-uh-DEE-kuh suh-BIFF-er-uh

Common name(s): Chinese tallow tree, popcorn tree, tallow tree

Family: *Euphorbiaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 8A through 11 (Figure 2)

Origin: native to China and Japan

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: Invasive and not recommended

Uses: attracts butterflies



Figure 1. Full Form—*Triadica sebifera*: Chinese tallow tree

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Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 20 to 50 feet

Spread: 25 to 35 feet

Crown uniformity: irregular

Crown shape: oval

Crown density: moderate

Growth rate: fast

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: simple

Leaf margin: entire

Leaf shape: rhomboid, deltoid, ovate

Leaf venation: pinnate, reticulate, brachidodrome

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaf blade length: 1 to 2½ inches

Leaf color: yellowish green

Fall color: reddish purple

Fall characteristic: showy

Flower

Flower color: yellow

Flower characteristics: not showy; emerges in clusters on long spikes

Flowering: spring

Fruit

Fruit shape: round

Fruit length: ½ inch

Fruit covering: dry or hard; 3 lobed capsule

Fruit color: white/gray, turns brown with maturity

Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem

Fruiting: late summer to early fall



Figure 3. Leaf—*Triadica sebifera*: Chinese tallow tree



Figure 4. Flower—*Triadica sebifera*: Chinese tallow tree

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically one trunk; no thorns

Bark: gray, smooth, becoming slightly rough with age

Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure

Breakage: susceptible to breakage

Current year twig color: green

Current year twig thickness: thin

Wood specific gravity: unknown



Figure 5. Fruit—*Triadica sebifera*: Chinese tallow tree



Figure 6. Bark—*Triadica sebifera*: Chinese tallow tree
Credits: Gitta Hasing

Use and Management

Chinese tallow tree is easily grown in full sun on a wide range of soils and is particularly drought-resistant and tolerant of compacted and wet soil. The abundant seeds create a multitude of unwanted volunteer seedlings. Roots tend to grow quite large near the soil surface and can be a nuisance in the lawn. There are places in Florida and in the Houston, Texas area where the tree has escaped cultivation and is invading native woodlands and the edge of wetlands. Therefore, use of this tree is not recommended! The wood is brittle and small to medium-sized branches often split from the tree as it grows to 15 years old.

Propagation is by seed or cuttings.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases of major concern.

Reference

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.

Culture

Light requirement: full sun

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

Drought tolerance: moderate

Aerosol salt tolerance: low

Other

Roots: can form large surface roots

Winter interest: no

Outstanding tree: no

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown

Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases