



## *Cotinus obovatus* American Smoketree<sup>1</sup>

Edward F. Gilman and Dennis G. Watson<sup>2</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

American Smoketree is most often seen as a large shrub 15 to 20 feet tall when grown in cultivation but can slowly become a 20 to 30-foot-tall, rounded tree with time, or in the wild (Fig. 1). The bark on older specimens flakes off at the base of the trunk showing a dark grey to black exfoliating character. Multiple trunks eventually become twisted and gnarled. The 7 to 12-inch, fairly sparse, fuzzy panicles of springtime flowers give the plant an unusual, somewhat smoky effect but American Smoketree is most outstanding for its beautiful foliage. The five to six-inch-long leaves are pinkish-bronze when young, mature to a lush, dark blue/green then, in autumn, change into gorgeous shades of yellow, red, orange, or purple. Very striking in the fall, one of the best for fall color since it lasts three to four weeks. Enough cannot be said about the fall color - it must be seen to be believed. Not seen often enough in cultivation, American Smoketree may be in danger of extinction in the wild due to the large trees having been harvested for the yellow and orange dye found in their wood.

### GENERAL INFORMATION

**Scientific name:** *Cotinus obovatus*

**Pronunciation:** koe-TYE-nus ob-oh-VAY-tus

**Common name(s):** American Smoketree, Chittamwood

**Family:** *Anacardiaceae*

**USDA hardiness zones:** 5 through 8 (Fig. 2)

**Origin:** native to North America

**Uses:** container or above-ground planter; large parking lot islands (> 200 square feet in size); wide

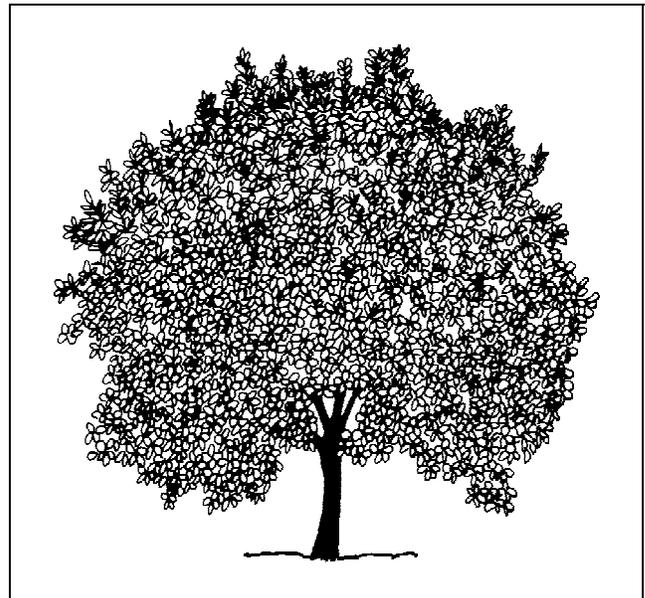


Figure 1. Middle-aged American Smoketree.

tree lawns (>6 feet wide); medium-sized parking lot islands (100-200 square feet in size); medium-sized tree lawns (4-6 feet wide); recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; near a deck or patio; reclamation plant; trainable as a standard; small parking lot islands (< 100 square feet in size); narrow tree lawns (3-4 feet wide); specimen; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); residential street tree; tree has been successfully grown in urban areas where air pollution, poor drainage, compacted soil, and/or drought are common

**Availability:** somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

1. This document is adapted from Fact Sheet ST-208, a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Publication date: November 1993.
2. Edward F. Gilman, associate professor, Environmental Horticulture Department; Dennis G. Watson, associate professor, Agricultural Engineering Department, Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville FL 32611.



Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

## DESCRIPTION

**Height:** 20 to 30 feet

**Spread:** 15 to 25 feet

**Crown uniformity:** symmetrical canopy with a regular (or smooth) outline, and individuals have more or less identical crown forms

**Crown shape:** round

**Crown density:** moderate

**Growth rate:** slow

**Texture:** medium

## Foliage

**Leaf arrangement:** alternate (Fig. 3)

**Leaf type:** simple

**Leaf margin:** entire

**Leaf shape:** elliptic (oval); obovate

**Leaf venation:** pinnate

**Leaf type and persistence:** deciduous

**Leaf blade length:** 4 to 8 inches; 2 to 4 inches

**Leaf color:** blue or blue-green; green

**Fall color:** orange; purple; red; yellow

**Fall characteristic:** showy

## Flower

**Flower color:** pink; white

**Flower characteristics:** showy; spring flowering

## Fruit

**Fruit shape:** oval

**Fruit length:** < .5 inch

**Fruit covering:** dry or hard

**Fruit color:** pink

**Fruit characteristics:** does not attract wildlife; no significant litter problem; showy

## Trunk and Branches

**Trunk/bark/branches:** bark is thin and easily damaged from mechanical impact; droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; routinely grown with, or trainable to be grown with, multiple trunks; showy trunk; tree wants to grow with several trunks but can be trained to grow with a single trunk; no thorns

**Pruning requirement:** requires pruning to develop strong structure

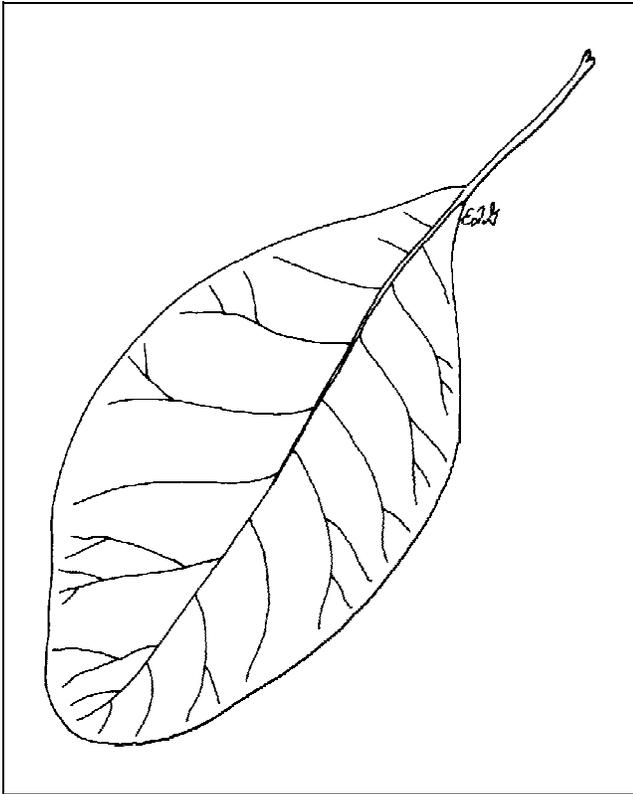


Figure 3. Foliage of American Smoketree.

**Breakage:** resistant

**Current year twig color:** brown; gray

**Current year twig thickness:** medium

### Culture

**Light requirement:** tree grows in part shade/part sun;  
tree grows in full sun

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

**Drought tolerance:** high

**Aerosol salt tolerance:** low

**Soil salt tolerance:** poor

### Other

**Roots:** surface roots are usually not a problem

**Winter interest:** no special winter interest

**Outstanding tree:** tree has outstanding ornamental  
features and could be planted more

**Invasive potential:** little, if any, potential at this time

**Verticillium wilt susceptibility:** susceptible

**Pest resistance:** long-term health usually not  
affected by pests

## USE AND MANAGEMENT

Smoketree is best used in a shrub border, or trained as a multiple-trunked patio or accent tree. It can be pruned to provide clearance beneath to allow for pedestrians to pass or for use as a street tree. The tree should be used more often in American landscapes.

A North American native, American Smoketree is tolerant of a wide range of adverse urban conditions - wet soil, wind, drought, and compacted soil. Plants grow well and are native to high pH, alkaline soil and should be located in full sun or partial shade. Best flowering, form, and overall attractiveness is achieved in full sun. May need occasional irrigation on sandy soil. It is reportedly difficult to transplant but this is easily overcome by growing in containers.

The cultivar 'Red Leaf' is popular for its especially brilliant fall color. Other cultivars selected for consistent and superior fall color are likely to be made available in the near future.

Propagation is by seed (with difficulty), cuttings, or layering.

## Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases are of major concern, except Verticillium wilt can kill trees if they become infected.