Sapium sebiferum
Chinese Tallowtree

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INTRODUCTION

With oval, pointed, deciduous leaves and an oval, open canopy, Chinese Tallowtree creates soft, dappled shade, (Fig. 1). 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, 30 to 35-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 red, yellow or orange and have fallen. Tallowtree 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: Sapium sebiferum
Pronunciation: SAY-pee-um suh-BIFF-er-um
Common name(s): Chinese Tallowtree, Popcorn Tree, Tallowtree
Family: Euphorbiaceae
USDA hardiness zones: 8 through 11 (Fig. 2)
Origin: not native to North America
Uses: not recommended for planting
Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

DESCRIPTION

Height: 30 to 35 feet
Spread: 25 to 35 feet
Crown uniformity: irregular outline or silhouette
Crown shape: oval
Crown density: moderate
Growth rate: fast
Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: entire

Figure 1. Mature Chinese Tallowtree.
Leaf shape: deltoid; ovate; rhomboid
Leaf venation: banchidodrome; pinnate; reticulate
Leaf type and persistence: deciduous
Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches; less than 2 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: orange; red; yellow
Fall characteristic: showy

Flower
Flower color: yellow
Flower characteristics: inconspicuous and not showy; spring flowering

Fruit
Fruit shape: round
Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch
Fruit covering: dry or hard
Fruit color: brown; white
Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; fruit, twigs, or foliage cause significant litter; persistent on the tree; showy

Trunk and Branches
Trunk/bark/branches: droop as the tree grows, and will require pruning for vehicular or pedestrian clearance beneath the canopy; not particularly showy; should be grown with a single leader; no thorns
Pruning requirement: requires pruning to develop strong structure
Breakage: susceptible to breakage either at the crotch due to poor collar formation, or the wood itself is weak and tends to break
Current year twig color: green
Current year twig thickness: thin

Culture
Light requirement: tree grows in full sun
Soil tolerances: clay; loam; sand; acidic; alkaline; extended flooding; well-drained
Drought tolerance: moderate
Aerosol salt tolerance: high
Other

**Roots:** surface roots can lift sidewalks or interfere with mowing  
**Winter interest:** no special winter interest  
**Outstanding tree:** not particularly outstanding  
**Invasive potential:** No entries found.  
**Pest resistance:** no pests are normally seen on the tree

**USE AND MANAGEMENT**

Chinese Tallowtree 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.