



# *Melia azedarach* Chinaberry<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Chinaberry is a round, deciduous, shade tree, reaching 30 to 40 feet at maturity and growing five to 10 feet during the first and second year after seed germination (Fig. 1). Growth slows as the tree reaches 15 or 20 feet tall. It is successfully grown in a wide variety of situations, including alkaline soil where other trees might fail. Truly an urban survivor, Chinaberry has become naturalized in much of the south.

## GENERAL INFORMATION

**Scientific name:** *Melia azedarach*

**Pronunciation:** MEEL-ee-uh uh-ZEE-duh-rack

**Common name(s):** Chinaberry

**Family:** *Meliaceae*

**USDA hardiness zones:** 7 through 10 (Fig. 2)

**Origin:** not native to North America

**Uses:** not recommended for planting; tree has been successfully grown in urban areas where air pollution, poor drainage, compacted soil, and/or drought are common

**Availability:** grown in small quantities by a small number of nurseries

## DESCRIPTION

**Height:** 30 to 40 feet

**Spread:** 15 to 25 feet

**Crown uniformity:** irregular outline or silhouette

**Crown shape:** round

**Crown density:** open

**Growth rate:** fast



Figure 1. Mature Chinaberry.

**Texture:** fine

## Foliage

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

**Leaf type:** bipinnately compound; odd pinnately compound

**Leaflet margin:** lobed; incised; serrate

**Leaflet shape:** elliptic (oval); ovate

**Leaflet venation:** pinnate

**Leaf type and persistence:** deciduous

**Leaflet blade length:** less than 2 inches

**Leaf color:** green

**Fall color:** yellow

**Fall characteristic:** showy

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

### Flower

**Flower color:** lavender

**Flower characteristics:** pleasant fragrance; inconspicuous and not showy; spring flowering

### Fruit

**Fruit shape:** round

**Fruit length:** < .5 inch

**Fruit covering:** fleshy

**Fruit color:** yellow

**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:** brown

**Current year twig thickness:** stout

### 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:** moderate

### Other

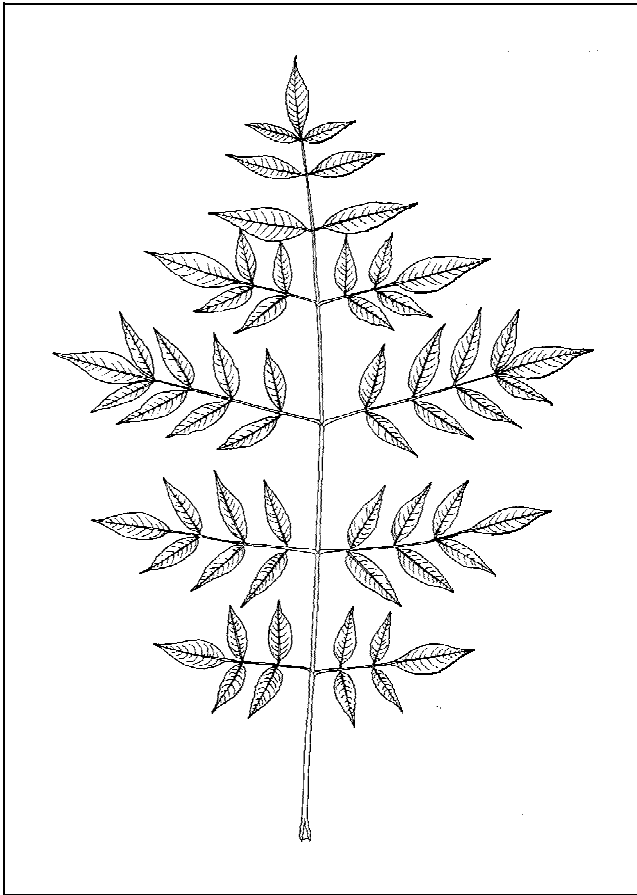
**Roots:** surface roots are usually not a problem

**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



**Figure 3.** Foliage of Chinaberry.

### **USE AND MANAGEMENT**

The clusters of lilac flowers are fragrant in the evening but are often hidden by the emerging foliage. The leaves turn a vivid yellow for a short time in the fall. The golden yellow fruit is quite attractive as it persists on the tree during the fall and winter. When eaten in quantities, the fruit is poisonous to people but not to birds. The wood is very brittle but it has been used in cabinet making.

Chinaberry is considered a "weed" tree in the southeastern U.S. and so it is not usually available from nurseries. It is killed back to the ground in the northern end of its range and is often seen as a several-year-old sprout. Many people despise the tree because it has taken over waste areas and other disturbed soil areas, and has naturalized over large areas of the south. It grows anywhere in any soil except wet soil. But with proper pruning to create a well-formed trunk and branch structure, the plant could improve its reputation. If you have one and would like to increase its life-span, prune to open up the crown to encourage development of a few well-spaced major limbs. You will not find anyone recommending

planting this tree but fine examples of the tree can be found growing in the worst soil.

Propagation is from seed or root cuttings.

The cultivar 'Umbracultiformis' has a dome-like form and could be the plant seen commonly in some wild stands. It is often sold as Texas Umbrella-Tree. It would be nice to find a fruitless selection.

### **Pests and Diseases**

Scale, whitefly and sooty mold infest Chinaberry.

Leaf spot causes premature defoliation.