



# *Sapium sebiferum* Chinese Tallowtree<sup>1</sup>

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

## 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

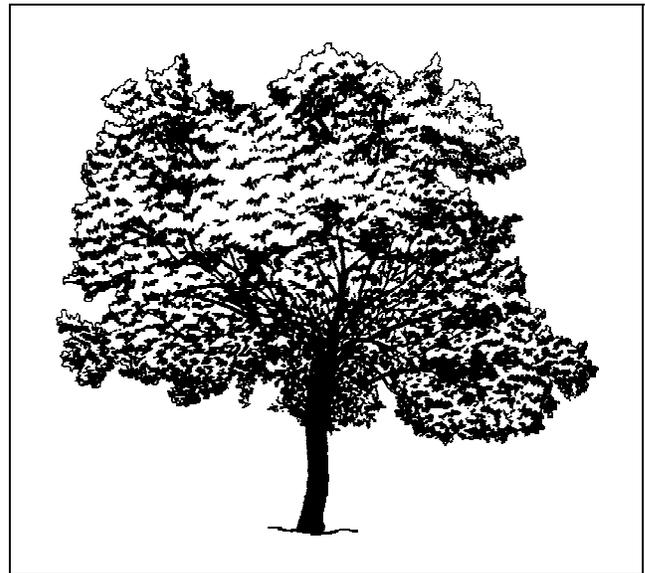


Figure 1. Mature Chinese Tallowtree.

## 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

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

**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

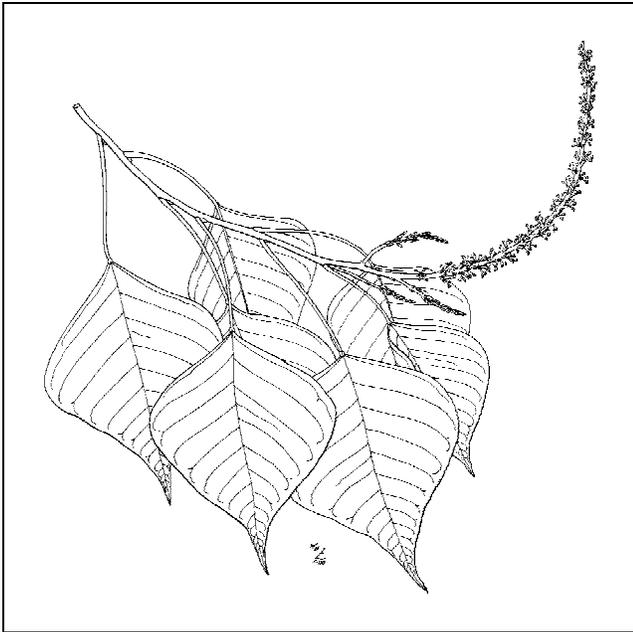


Figure 3. Foliage of Chinese Tallowtree.

### 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.