

Weed alert

Chinese tallow

(*Sapium sebiferum*)

Chinese Tallow

Chinese tallow, a small to medium-sized tree native to China, was introduced into the United States as an ornamental in the 18th century. In North and Central Florida, the tree has escaped cultivation and has invaded closed-canopy forests, bottomland hardwood forests, lakeshores and wetlands. Insect herbivory on Chinese tallow is low in the U.S., and it offers little food value for native species. Chinese tallow can rapidly displace native vegetation in Florida wetlands by forming dense monospecific stands. The trees may also increase nutrient loading of aquatic systems through leaf drop and fast decay, which may lead to much higher concentrations of phosphorus, potassium, nitrates, zinc, manganese and iron in infested waterways. It is a fast growing tree, and its foliage becomes yellow to red during the fall. New growth on Chinese tallow begins as early as February and flowering lasts from March through May. Fruit ripens from August to November. The tree is deciduous, losing leaves during the autumn. Young trees establish a taproot system and are able to withstand extended periods of drought. Its primary seed vectors are birds (pileated woodpeckers have been observed eating the seed) and moving waters (tests show seed viability even after several weeks of floating in water).



Why Chinese tallow must be managed:

Chinese tallow is adaptable to growing in most soils from moderately wet to dry, saline to fresh. It is now widespread in Florida along roadside ditches, coastal areas and streams, often forming dense thickets. It readily colonizes low-lying areas, and also thrives in upland, better-drained areas in and near towns. It can colonize open sites or invade closed-canopy forests. The rapid growth and spread of this species represents a significant threat to Florida's aquatic and upland environments.



Flower spikes



Fall foliage and "popcorn" fruit

Because of its aggressive growth rate, never plant Chinese tallow trees. There are native trees that provide shade and do not harm the environment. Possession of Chinese tallow with the intent to sell, transport or plant is illegal in Florida.



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*Synonymy: Croton sebiferus L.,
Stillingia sebifera, Triadica sebifera*

Chinese Tallow (*Sapium sebiferum*)

Chinese tallow, a deciduous tree to 16 m (52 ft), has a fast rate of growth maturing in 3-5 years. The tree flowers in spring, sets fruit in late-summer and early fall with an average of 100,000 per tree. Seeds are bird-dispersed. Untreated stumps and roots can sprout.



Leaves: simple, alternate and broadly ovate, 3-6 cm (1-2.5 in) wide. Leaf blades pinnately veined and broadly ovate, with broadly rounded bases. Petioles slender, mostly about 2-5 cm (1-2 in.) long.



Flowers: small, yellow, borne on spikes to 20 cm (8 in.) long, with 2-3 sepals (petals absent) and 2-3 stamens or 3 styles. Female flowers on lower spike, male flowers above.



Fruits: a three-lobed capsule, 1 cm (0.5 in) wide with one seed in each lobe. Dull white seeds are covered with vegetable tallow, a white waxy coating.

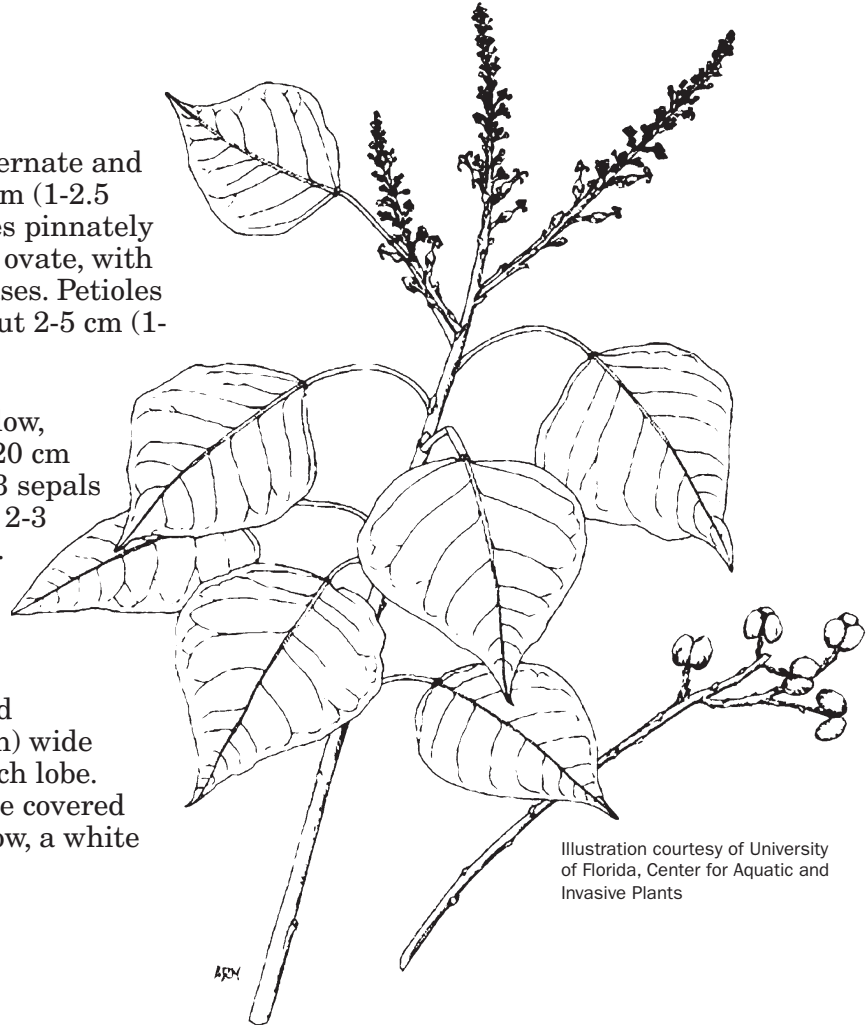


Illustration courtesy of University of Florida, Center for Aquatic and Invasive Plants

Look at first:

- open fruit capsules that look like popcorn
- seeds with a white waxy coating
- oval, aspen-like leaves

Distribution

Established in the outer coastal plain of South Carolina and adjacent North Carolina, south to Florida, and west to eastern Texas. Native to Eastern Asia.



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