

The American Smoke Tree

A Civil War Survivor

By Eva Monheim

As an arborist, I am always looking for great trees to recommend for difficult areas, such as polluted streetscapes or sites with poor soil. American smoke tree or chittamwood (*Cotinus obovatus*) is one gem that might fit the bill for just those trying environmental situations.

The American smoke tree's European/Asian cousin, the ever-popular smoke bush (*Cotinus coggryia*) has worked its way into our local landscape quite effectively. But what about our native American smoke tree? First discovered by Thomas Nuttall in 1819, the tree was introduced into cultivation in the US and England in 1882 through the

Arnold Arboretum in Boston. The plant is a member of the cashew/sumac (ANACARDIACEAE) family, known for the production of urushiol oil found in poison ivy and poison sumac. But this group is also well known for its highly valued food crops like mangos and cashews. The smoke tree is not considered poisonous, and early herbals make reference to its medicinal attributes.

During the Civil War, smoke tree's orange/yellow resinous sap was prized for producing a dye used to color Confederate uniforms. The bark also produced high-quality tannins for the leather tanning process. In addition, the wood was used as fencing posts that proved to be insect and disease resistant. This avid use of the smoke tree almost pushed it to extinction, something reflected in its dramatically smaller post-war population.

In its native regions, the tree is usually found growing at an altitude of 700 to 2,000 feet on steep rocky hillsides in soils mainly composed of a limestone base. Drought, heat, and cold tolerant (Zones 4 to 8), the smoke tree would prefer poor and urban soils of varying pH over a deep, nutrient-rich soil. Surprisingly, rich soils actually weaken the wood of the specimen. Again, the varied environmental conditions that the tree can endure make it highly desirable as a city dweller.

Although the straight species is hard to find in the trade, Michael Colibraro from Colibraro Nurseries in Horsham, Pennsylvania, says there are several fine cultivars available on the market. The highly desirable *Cotinus* × 'Grace' is a cross between *Cotinus obovatus* and a cultivar of *Cotinus coggryia*. *Cotinus obovatus* 'Red Leaf' was selected for its red fall foliage.

Temple University Arboretum has a lovely specimen tucked into a



small planting bed between two buildings off a slate patio. The area is hot and dry during the summer, which never seems to affect the smoke tree's robust growth. In fact, the large ovate, cool green leaves (approximately 2 to 12 inches long) look almost tropical. The leaf petioles are a rose pink hue and they hold the leaf blades 2 to 2 1/2 inches away from the branch of the tree.

For cultivation, plant the American smoke tree in light wooded areas, along the woodland edge, or in full sun. The tree is great for use in containers and once established can grow in shallow soils, in small planting areas, and under power lines. Although the American smoke tree has been known to grow as high as 80 feet, its average height ranges from 20 to 30 feet and it exhibits a slightly narrower to similar width with a rounded crown. In higher pHs the tree will have a shorter, shrub-like stature, while in lower pHs it will grow taller.

With excellent fall color, overall toughness, and a bark that acquires better texture with age, the American smoke tree is a clear winner for the landscape.

Eva Monheim is a horticultural lecturer at Temple University and a certified arborist. She is a member of PHS's Education Committee and has worked for its Tree Tenders project, as well as for Tree Vitalize, a program of the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.



SOURCES

Redbud Nursery
www.redbudnativeplantnursery.com

American Native Plants
www.americannativeplantsonline.com