

A Jewel for Urban Gardens: American Smoketree

by Eva Monheim

THREE YEARS AGO, while teaching a woody plants class at Temple University in Philadelphia, I came across a tree in the university's arboretum that I had heard about but never seen in the landscape: the American smoketree or chittamwood (*Cotinus obovatus*, USDA Zones 4 to 8, AHS Zones 9 to 3).

I was initially drawn to the tree by its large, oval leaves, approximately four to six inches in length, which created a tropical appearance in contrast to the finer-leaved plants in the surrounding landscape. Its two-inch-long, rose-colored petioles also caught my eye.

Cotinus obovatus is in the sumac family (Anacardiaceae), which includes many desirable food crops such as mangos and cashews. Other plants in the family such as poison ivy and poison oak contain the skin irritant urushiol, but the American smoketree is not considered poisonous.

Native from Tennessee to Alabama, and west to the Edwards Plateau of Texas, American smoketree had an even greater range before the Civil War, but because the yellow-orange heartwood and resinous sap were used to create the dye for Confederate troop uniforms, overharvesting almost led to the tree's extinction. In the wild, it is generally found at an altitude of 700 to 2,000 feet on steep rocky hill-sides and ravines with limestone-based soils. It tends to develop a short, squat trunk, but, in some cases, will form multiple trunks.

As an arborist, I am always looking for trees suitable for urban landscapes, and *Cotinus obovatus* adapts well to drought, heat, and cold. It grows best in poor soils and has minimal insect and disease problems. American smoketree may grow to 80 feet tall but generally grows to 20 to 30 feet in both height and width, making it ideal for smaller gardens.

American smoketree is dioecious—that is, male and female flowers are found on



American smoketree produces airy clusters of pinkish flowers in late spring, left. Its foliage provides vivid fall color, above.

separate trees. In bloom, male trees are showier than female

trees. The smoketree gets its name from the feathery plumelike flower clusters known as panicles, which appear in late spring and remain into fall. The filamentous structures in massed abundance resemble smoke hovering about the plant. The seeds, many of which are sterile, ripen in fall on female trees.

Cotinus obovatus is particularly prized for its amazing fall color, which varies from yellow-apricot to red depending on

Sources

Forestfarm, Williams, OR. (541) 846-7269. www.forestfarm.com.

Rare Find Nursery, Jackson, NJ. (732) 833-1965. www.rarefindnursery.com.

Shooting Star Nursery, Georgetown, KY. (866) 405-7979. www.shootingstarnursery.com.

genetic variation, environmental conditions, and fall nighttime temperatures.

The species is hard to find in the trade, but Michael Colibraro of Colibraro Nurseries and Landscape, Inc., in Horsham, Pennsylvania, says several good cultivars are available. According to Colibraro, 'Grace' is a highly desirable landscape tree that more people should consider. It is a cross between *Cotinus obovatus* and a cultivar of *C. coggygia*. Another notable cultivar is *C. obovatus* 'Red Leaf', bred for its consistent red fall color.

Propagation of this tree is best done with softwood cuttings taken in the spring, just before the new season's growth hardens. Consider planting American smoketree in a large container, small garden plot, or as an espalier. Though its characteristic brittle wood might suffer storm damage, smoketree will regenerate if stems are pruned to the ground. Locate this plant where you can enjoy its wonderful characteristics in all four seasons.

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