

Ligustrum sinense Lour.



Common Name: Chinese ligustrum, Chinese privet, variegated ligustrum (in cultivation)

Synonymy: None, but includes cultivars labeled *stauntonii*, *nanum*, *pendulum*

Origin: China

Botanical Description: Semideciduous shrub or small tree to 4 m (12 ft) tall or more; twigs densely pubescent. Leaves opposite, simple (on long twigs, at first glance, may appear compound), all green (in cultivation usually variegated—cream, white, and green); leaf blades to 4 cm (1.5 in) long and 2 cm (0.75 in) wide, elliptic to elliptic-oblong, with tips blunt, margins entire, and pubescence persistent on midvein below; petioles short, pubescent. Flowers many, white, small, somewhat unpleasantly fragrant, on slender pubescent stalks in narrow, conical panicles, terminal on branchlets. Fruits dark blue or bluish black drupes, ellipsoid to subglobose, mostly 4-5 mm (0.2 in) long.

NOTE: May be confused with native privets (*Foresteria* spp.), but their leaves with small marginal teeth or their leaves without petioles; and the native Walter's viburnum (*Viburnum obovatum* Walt.), but its young stem tips covered with rust-colored scales.

Ecological Significance: Occurs most densely in open, disturbed areas, especially low wet places, but also invades less disturbed upland hammocks and pinelands, river and stream floodplains, lake shores, and edges of swamps and marshes, often becoming locally abundant even in deep shade. Has moved into undisturbed relict slope hammock, threatening to displace the globally endangered Miccosukee gooseberry, *Ribes echinellum* (K. C. Burks, Fl. Department of Environmental Protection, personal observations). Considered a “troublesome exotic” or “noxious weed” in much of the Southeast (Dirr 1983, Nelson 1996). Often unrecognized, however, because naturalized populations revert to all-green leaf color following sexual reproduction and seed dispersal by

birds, while vegetatively propagated cultivars generally sold with variegated leaves (Dirr 1983). Difficult to control once established in wetlands such as floodplains (Nelson 1996). Also a natural-area weed in bushlands of Australia (Burrows and Kohen 1986) and relict subtropical forests of Argentina (Montaldo 1993). Introduced in the South as an ornamental in 1852 (Dirr 1983) and noted as naturalized as early as 1933 (Small 1933); noted as widely spread in later floristic works (Radford et al. 1968, Godfrey and Wooten 1981, Clewell 1985). Still cultivated in 10 southern states (Meyer et al. 1994).

Distribution: In Florida, documented as invading maritime hammocks, beach dunes, hardwood hammocks, lake and stream shores, and ruderal communities. Documented by herbarium specimens in 23 counties predominately in the Panhandle ranging as far west as Escambia County to Duval County on the east coast, and south to Miami-Dade County (Wunderlin and Hansen 2004). Reported in natural areas in Holmes, Bay, Wakulla, Citrus, and St. Lucie counties (FLEPPC 2005). Also widely naturalized elsewhere in the South, from the Carolinas to Texas, and north to Kentucky and Tennessee (Radford et al. 1968, Correll and Johnston 1970).

Life History: Readily escapes cultivation (Nelson 1996). Can form impenetrable thickets and thrive in sunny concrete crevices as well as in fully shaded floodplains—“found about everywhere that birds fly” (Dirr 1983). Dispersal by birds important to new colonizations (Montaldo 1993) and higher seed germination (Burrows and Kohen 1986). Flowers and fruits prolifically in late spring, an average square meter of canopy producing about 1,300 fruits (Burrows and Kohen 1986). Pure variegated form not known to produce viable seed (H. Gramling, Tampa Bay Wholesale Growers, 1998 pers. comm.). Can handle frequent pruning (Yeager and Ingram 1986). Occasionally susceptible in cultivation to infestation by whiteflies (Dickey and Mowry 1969).