

Sapium sebiferum (L.) Roxb.



Common Name: Chinese tallow tree, popcorn tree, Florida aspen, white wax berry, chicken tree

Synonymy: *Croton sebiferus* L., *Stillingia sebifera* Michx., *Triadica sebifera* (L.) Small

Origin: Eastern Asia

Botanical Description: Deciduous tree to 16 m (52 ft), commonly to 10 m (33 ft). Sap milky. Leaves simple, alternate, entire, broadly ovate, 3-6 cm (1-2.5 in) wide, with broadly rounded bases and abruptly acuminate (tapering to a slender point) tips; petioles slender, 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), 2-3 stamens or 3 styles (plants monoecious). Fruit a 3-lobed capsule, 1 cm (0.5 in) wide, turning brown and splitting open at maturity to reveal 3, dull-white seeds, which remain attached for a time.

Ecological Significance: Considered a common agricultural weed in Taiwan, requiring constant effort and expense to hold at bay (Holm et al. 1979). Originally introduced in 1772 by Noble Wimberly Jones, a farmer from Darien, Georgia, who received the seeds from Benjamin Franklin, who envisioned the species being used for wax and oil production (Bell 1966). In 1906, the Foreign Plant Introduction Division of the USDA advocated extensive cultivation of Chinese tallow in coastal Louisiana and Texas in an effort to establish a commercial soap industry (Flack and Furlow, 1996). Subsequently introduced repeatedly to the United States as an ornamental (Jones and McLeod, 1989). Considered an invasive pest plant in the Carolinas since the 1970s. Has expanded its range on the United States Gulf Coast in low-lying areas, becoming dominant and spreading along roadside ditches and into areas where the soil remains moist (Cameron and LaPoint 1978). Also thrives in upland, well-drained areas near human habitation and

in undisturbed areas such as closed canopy forests, in bottomland hardwood forests, shores of waterbodies, and sometimes on floating islands (Godfrey 1988). Survives in both poorly drained freshwater and saline soils (Scheld and Cowles 1981). Tends to take over large areas (Bonner 1974).

Distribution: Naturalized in outer coastal plain of South Carolina and adjacent North Carolina, also in Richmond County, North Carolina (Radford et al. 1968), south through Florida, and west to eastern Texas (Godfrey 1988). Found throughout Florida south to Manatee County on the Gulf coast and St. Lucie County on the Atlantic coast (Jubinsky 1993). Has potential range through southern Florida to the upper Florida Keys (Broschat and Meerow 1991). In Florida, documented as invading mesic flatwoods, scrubby flatwoods, alluvial floodplain forest, strand swamp, and ruderal communities. Documented by herbarium specimens from 31 counties scattered throughout Florida from as far west as Escambia County in the Panhandle to Duval County on the east coast, south through the peninsula to Charlotte and Miami-Dade counties (Wunderlin and Hansen 2004). Has also been reported in natural areas from 16 additional counties throughout Florida (FLEPPC 2005). By 1996 (Jubinsky and Anderson), it had been recorded as naturalized in 57% of Florida's counties.

Life History: Early growth rate very rapid with flowering and fruiting from the time the tree is about 1 m (3.3 ft) tall. Also physiological and/or mechanical stress results in profuse coppicing from stumps. Flowers in spring (Broschat and Meerow 1991), with fruit ripening August to November. Seeds primarily dispersed by birds and water (Jubinsky 1993). A comprehensive management plan for Chinese tallow has been developed by McCormick (2005) and is available at the FLEPPC Web site (www.fleppc.org).