

Paulownia tomentosa – Princess Tree

Variously known as the Empress tree, Princess tree or Royal Paulownia, this is one of those trees that hardly needs any introduction. Originating in Asia and grown in China from antiquity it is a showy ornamental that has naturalised throughout much of the world. As with many legends, the facts can but given optimum conditions it can grow 3m in a year and it is the worlds fastest growing hardwood. It produces masses of large light pink to mauve bell-shaped flowers that are very showy and delightfully perfumed.

Paulownia can reach about 15m at maturity with a spread of about the same. It can take a range of soils and can take the frostiest of Australian conditions. Propagation from seed is easy and reliable.

Propagation

Propagation is straightforward without the need to pretreat seed. Simply soak it overnight and sow lightly in a good medium potting mix. Paulownia needs light to germinate and a temperature in the range of 15 to 20°C, preferably in the higher end of that range.

Prick individual seedlings out into individual tubes as soon as they are large enough to handle and grow on until at least 15cm in height. Plant out in their permanent position after the danger of frost has passed. It likes a deep, moderately fertile and moisture retentive but well-drained soil and is best suited in a sheltered, sunny position. Plants, and especially seedlings less than 2 years old, are frost tender when young, so in cooler climates it is best to grow these on in conditions where they can be given some frost protection.

The flower buds are formed in autumn are hardy to about -15°C when dormant and plants can be excited into premature growth during mild Winter weather. This growth is then more susceptible to frost damage and so it is best not to fertilise in the late Autumn.