

Ceiba species

Ceiba pentandra is commonly known as the Kapok tree or Silk-Cotton tree. The Kapok tree is a majestic tree of the tropical rainforests. Originally a native to South America it now has spread to the primary rainforests of West Africa, and the Southeast Asian rainforests of the Malay Peninsula, and the Indonesian archipelago. It can grow to a height of 45m or more, towering over other trees in the rainforest.

The straight trunks are cylindrical, smooth and gray in color, and can reach a diameter of 3m. Large spines protrude from the trunk to discourage damage to the trunk and thin, plank type buttresses stabilise the giant and can extend to 10m. The branches grow in horizontal tiers and spread out widely with the crown having an open umbrella shape. The wood is a pinkish white to ashy brown in colour with a straight grain.

Kapoks are drought deciduous, shedding most or all of their leaves during the tropical dry season. The leaves are palmate and compound, the 5 - 9 leaflets are 7 - 8cm long and 1 - 3.5cm wide. Flowers usually open before the leaves appear and are clustered on new branches. The 5 petals of a flower are about 2.5cm long and are a creamy white or pale pink in colour, their odour is unpleasant, but is probably meant to attract the bats that pollinate them. The brown seeds are round like peas and are found in pods and the pods that contain them are woody, smooth and pendulous with a light green color. They burst open while still on the tree after the leaves have fallen. Inside a whitish cotton like fiber surrounds the brown seeds and these are blown away on the wind.

Propagation

Propagation is straight-forward although seed germination benefits from basic pre-treatment by either soaking overnight in lukewarm water or soaking for 5 minutes in initially boiling water and cooling for 24 hours.

This is a tropical species and seed germinates best at a temperature in excess of 22°C. Germination time is dictated by the availability of warmth to promote germination.

Sow seed in a light well-draining propagation medium to a depth of 3mm. Prick young seedlings out into individual containers after the development of the second true leaf. Use a container or propagation tube with plenty of depth to allow deep root development. Grow on as desired.

Plant out in final position after the danger of frost has passed. Young seedlings benefit from partial shade, but the final site should be in full sun in a rich well-drained soil.