

Cercidiphyllum japonicum – Katsura Tree

Cercidiphyllum japonicum, commonly known as Katsura is a tree to some 45m in height and found growing naturally in Japan, northern China and east Asia. It is a cold hardy, deciduous tree that is renowned for its beauty, particularly in the autumn with its vibrant colour change. It makes an excellent ornamental, specimen tree or bonsai subject.

This tree has different male and female forms - male trees are usually single trunked in a slender conical shape and female trees normally produce multiple trunks and branches are as wide as the height of the tree. The furrowed, dark brown bark shreds along the main branches and trunk of older trees giving a shaggy appearance. Leaves are basically heart shaped and from 3 - 8cm in length and 3 - 6cm in width. They open a purplish-pink shade in the Spring, turn a dark bluish green during the Summer and change to bright yellow, pink and orange - red in the Autumn. The leaves emit a scent of burnt sugar, which becomes stronger when a leaf is crushed. The flowers are inconspicuous, small wind-pollinated catkins - the fruit is a cluster of 2 - 4 small pods, each pod 1cm long with numerous small, flattened and winged seeds.

Katsura is a highly ornamental tree, grown for its delicate leaves and fabulous Autumn colour. Where conditions are suitable, it is fast growing, but it is very sensitive to drought and needs deep, permanently moist soil. It is very frost hardy. Plant in full sun to light shade and grows best in moist, but well-drained, fertile, loamy soil.

Propagation

Seed requires no pre-treatment other than soaking for a few hours prior to sowing.

SOW – in a good quality well-draining potting mix. Sow seed by pressing lightly into the medium – do not cover. Keep the medium moist but not damp and cover the seed tray or pot with a light plastic cover. Place seed tray or pot in a warm shady position.

Prick small seedlings out into their own containers after the emergence of the second true leaf and grow on as desired.

PLANTING OUT – Plant out as desired in the Autumn, preferably when the seedling is at least 20cm in height. Katsura like full sun to light shade (in hotter areas). The Autumn colour change is more dramatic when grown in soils with an acid pH. Katsura is frost hardy, taking temperatures down to -20°C, but it is drought sensitive and requires a good steady water supply.