

Toona ciliata – Red Cedar

Once the pride of the east coast rainforests from south of Sydney to Cape York, this tree at maturity is a stately giant to 40m with a trunk girth of up to 3m. Sadly not too many of us will live to see one we cultivate reach this size, and there are not many left in the wild as the timber has been highly valued as a cabinet timber for generations and most are long gone.

Remember, this is a deciduous tree. It has an open spreading habit with rough, scaly, grey to brown shedding bark. Foliage consists of large, attractive pinnate (compound leaflets arranged on either side of a central stalk) leaves to 12cm, darker on the top than the bottom and making an attractive luxuriant showing. Blooms are small white or pink flowers that appear in late Spring, they are followed by woody ovoid brown fruits. With age the trunk can be buttressed.

This is a rainforest tree that likes its water, but it can grow successfully in drier, cooler areas as a smaller tree. The deciduous nature of this tree protects it from the worst ravages of climates cooler than its native area, but it is frost tender.

There are some tricks to successfully growing this tree. One benefit of growing it in cooler areas is that it is not attacked by predatory insects to the same extent as in warmer areas, but it does benefit from shade in at least its early stages. Although a valuable timber tree, red cedar has not been successful as a plantation tree, at least in part because of attack by the Red Cedar Tip Moth which progressively attacks new branches, hindering the vertical growth of the tree. This occurs in its rainforest territory as well but is greatly slowed as the moth requires direct sun to mature and it is protected by the shady understorey conditions in which the maturing tree grows. By the time it reaches direct sunlight in the forest canopy it is well enough established to better resist this predation.

Propagation

Propagation can be carried out at any time in subtropical or warmer climates but it is best started anywhere south of Sydney in October or November to offset its deciduous characteristics. Seed germinates readily without requiring any pretreatment, although forestry experimentation has shown that germination can be greatly sped up by stratification (cold treatment) seed for 30 days at 3°C.

Sow seed in a good quality potting mix kept moist but not damp. Seed should be sprinkled on the surface of the media and then covered lightly.

Transplant after germination into individual containers at third leaf stage. Seedlings are slow growing at first and benefit from several months of shade. Potted stock reaches plantable size in about 18 months to 2 years.



MARKET GREEN AND FRESH SEEDS

