

Sapium sebiferum – Chinese Tallow Tree

Sapium sebiferum, commonly known as the Chinese Tallow Tree is a fast growing deciduous tree reaching a height of 7m with a rounded or conical crown and an open, airy look. Grown mostly as an ornamental, it is one of the few deciduous trees to produce a good autumn colour display in areas with mild winters. Foliage is normally a mid-green. In autumn the leaves turn brilliant shades of scarlet, orange, yellow and maroon. The Spring flowers are in yellowish green catkins on the branch tips, followed in the Autumn by seed pods that turn brown and split revealing three seeds.

Native to southern China a substantial industry once revolved around the harvesting and processing of its waxy seeds. The wax, which was processed to make candles and the seeds were then pressed to extract an oil for use in lamps, as a purgative, and for making oil-paper and soap.

Chinese Tallow Tree grows from cool temperate to subtropical zones. In frost prone areas it likes a warm sheltered position with some protection for trees when young. It will grow in a range of soils but prefers a well-drained humus sandy loam. Site in a warm sunny position to promote Autumn colour. Water well until the tree becomes established.

It can also make an excellent bonsai subject. Please note that in warmer wetter climates Chinese tallow can be weedy. We prefer it as a bonsai subject where seeding can be controlled.

Propagation

Seed germinates without any need of pre-treatment other than soaking overnight. It is beneficial to germination to remove as much of the waxy seed coating as possible.

Sow seed in a well-draining potting mix and keep moist but not damp. Cover seed to the depth of the seed and water in lightly. Place your seed tray in a warm sunny position. In cooler climates it can be beneficial to enclose your seed tray or pot in a plastic bag. Best germinating temperature is 18 to 21°C daytime temperature.

Pot seedlings on at about 4 cm and then grow on in a warm sheltered position for the first year. Protect young seedlings from slugs and snails.

Plant out as desired in a sunny position.