

SARATOGA HORTICULTURAL FOUNDATION, INC.

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Sapium sebiferum, the Chinese tallow tree

Sapium sebiferum of the Euphorbia family, the Euphorbiaceae, is native to parts of western and southern China, where it is also cultivated at low elevations. It is in Taiwan (Formosa) but probably was introduced there from mainland China. It takes its common name from the commercial tallow and oil which its seeds yield. The seeds have a whitish waxy covering from which a solid fat or tallow is obtained. The fat has been used in the manufacture of candles and soap. After removing the fatty covering, crushed seeds produce a drying oil, sometimes called stillingia oil.

Chinese tallow tree is deciduous, 20-30 ft. tall, leaves are broadly ovate to deltoid or poplar-like, 1 1/2 - 3 in. long, small inconspicuous yellow flowers, lacking petals, are arranged in slender racemes, 2-4 in. long, the fruit is a rounded capsule about 1/2 in. wide, with 3 whitish seeds having a waxy covering.

In autumn the leaves turn various shades of red, from orange-red to maroon, and golden-yellow making the tree an attractive ornamental. Introduced into the southeastern United States it has become naturalized from South Carolina to Florida and Louisiana. It has been in California since 1888 and is occasionally seen as a lawn, patio or street tree. Advantages in addition to its fall color are its usefulness in warm areas where it is drought tolerant, hardiness to 10 - 15 deg. F. and resistance to oak root fungus. Because of its potential but limited use in California Saratoga Horticultural Foundation in the 1950s wished to increase its availability. Several trees were located in Fresno in the garden of Milo Rowell where fall coloring was outstanding. Through the generosity of Mr. Rowell seeds were obtained by the Foundation in 1956. It was found that nursery production following seed germination was fairly easy but propagation by cuttings did not prove successful.

Elizabeth McClintock  
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