Chinese tallow trees continue to be a concern

Chinese tallow (Sapium sebiferum), more commonly known as popcorn tree, has beautiful fall color, fast growth rate and few pest problems. These qualities make it seem to be the ideal landscape tree.

Because of recent questions and comments concerning the use of this tree in landscapes, I’m rerunning an edited version of an article that originally ran in my column in November 1996.

Native to China, it’s believed the Chinese tallow was introduced to Charleston, South Carolina in the late 1700’s. A large number of the trees were brought to the United States Gulf Coast during the early 1900’s to establish a soap industry based upon the large amounts of oil found around the seed.

Since the initial introduction of these trees, Chinese tallows have spread from South Carolina to Florida and west to Texas. In Florida they can be found from Escambia County eastward to Jacksonville and as far south as Tampa. Because of this tree’s invasiveness, there is a concern from biologists and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. This tree is now threatening both agricultural production areas and native plant communities.

Chinese tallow has rapidly invaded wild areas in Florida. This is mainly due to seeds that are spread by birds. They are also carried by rivers and streams. For example, it is found in Paynes Prairie near Gainesville, miles from human habitation. Jim Weimer, Park Biologist at Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park, documented in excess of 10,000 trees in 1992.

This tree has also been found to be a problem in lowland areas-sometimes growing in the waters edge of a lake. On some wet sites, the popcorn tree will out compete native trees and shrubs becoming the dominant species. This plant survives well in both poorly drained freshwater and saline soils.

Another concern is that the invasive nature of this tree has resulted in the disruption of native ecosystems. It produces toxic organic chemicals capable of stupefying fish. It produces tumor-promoting compounds. There is concern about its effect on livestock and it may interfere with the reproduction of certain aquatic organisms.

It is difficult to talk people into removing attractive trees that are often major features in their landscape. But the Chinese tallow’s beauty is deceptive.

In Florida, Chinese tallow was added to Rule Chapter 5B-57 as a prohibited noxious plant. As a result, the sale and distribution of this tree has not been permitted as of January 1, 1998.
For additional information on this invasive tree, including its biology, control and suggested replacement trees, contact your local UF/IFAS Extension Office or visit http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/AG148.

Larry Williams
Horticulture Agent, Horticulture
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