

Melia azedarach: Chinaberry¹

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Introduction

Chinaberry is a round, deciduous, shade tree, reaching 30 to 40 feet at maturity and growing 5 to 10 feet during the first and second year after seed germination. Growth slows as the tree reaches 15 or 20 feet tall. It is successfully grown in a wide variety of situations, including alkaline soil where other trees might fail. Truly an urban survivor, chinaberry has become naturalized in much of the South.

General Information

Scientific name: *Melia azedarach*

Pronunciation: MEEL-ee-uh uh-ZEE-duh-rack

Common name(s): chinaberry

Family: *Meliaceae*

USDA hardiness zones: 7A through 10B (Figure 2)

Origin: native to India, China, and the Himalayas

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: invasive and not recommended (North); caution, may be recommended but manage to prevent escape (Central, South)

Description

Height: 30 to 40 feet

Spread: 15 to 25 feet

Crown uniformity: irregular

Crown shape: round



Figure 1. Full form - *Melia azedarach*: chinaberry

Credits: UF/IFAS

1. This document is ENH-565, one of a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date November 1993. Revised December 2018. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.
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Crown density: open

Growth rate: fast

Texture: fine

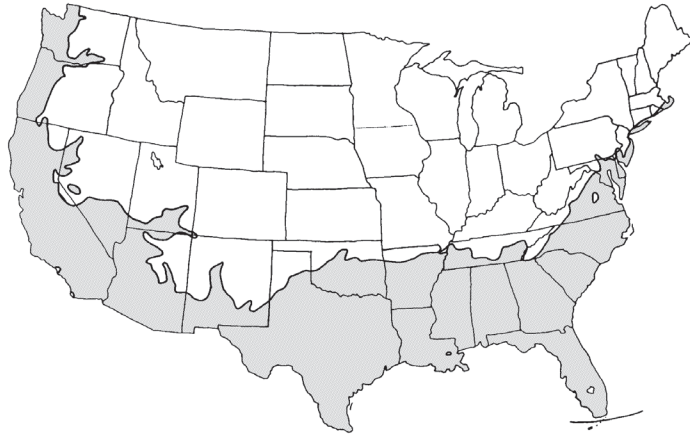


Figure 2. Range

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate

Leaf type: bipinnately compound, odd-pinnately compound

Leaf margin: serrate, lobed, incised

Leaf shape: ovate, elliptic (oval)

Leaf venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaf blade length: 1 to 2 feet; secondary leaflets are 1 to 2 ½ inches

Leaf color: dark green on top, paler green underneath

Fall color: yellow

Fall characteristic: showy



Figure 3. Leaf - *Melia azedarach*: chinaberry
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Flower

Flower color: lavender or purplish

Flower characteristics: not showy; fragrant; emerges in clusters on 8" long, branched panicles

Flowering: spring



Figure 4. Flower - *Melia azedarach*: chinaberry
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Fruit

Fruit shape: round

Fruit length: 1/3 to 3/4 inch

Fruit covering: fleshy drupe

Fruit color: yellow

Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem

Fruiting: summer

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically one trunk; no thorns

Bark: reddish brown and smooth, becoming slightly fissured with age

Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure

Breakage: susceptible to breakage

Current year twig color: brown

Current year twig thickness: very thick

Wood specific gravity: unknown



Figure 5. Fruit - *Melia azedarach*: chinaberry
Credits: UF/IFAS



Figure 6. Bark - *Melia azedarach*: chinaberry
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Culture

Light requirement: full sun to partial shade

Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; alkaline; acidic; well-drained

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: moderate

Other

Roots: not a problem

Winter interest: no

Outstanding tree: no

Ozone sensitivity: unknown

Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown

Pest resistance: free of serious pests and diseases

Use and Management

The clusters of lilac flowers are fragrant in the evening but are often hidden by the emerging foliage. The leaves turn a vivid yellow for a short time in the fall. The golden yellow fruit is quite attractive as it persists on the tree during the fall and winter. When eaten in quantities, the fruit is poisonous to people but not to birds. The wood is very brittle but it has been used in cabinet making.

Chinaberry is considered a “weed” tree in the southeastern U.S., and so it is not usually available from nurseries. It is killed back to the ground in the northern end of its range and is often seen as a several-year-old sprout. Many people despise the tree because it has taken over waste areas and other disturbed soil areas, and has naturalized over large areas of the South. It grows anywhere in any soil except wet soil. But with proper pruning to create a well-formed trunk and branch structure, the plant could improve its reputation. If you have one and would like to increase its life-span, prune to open up the crown to encourage development of a few well-spaced major limbs. You will not find anyone recommending planting this tree but fine examples of the tree can be found growing in the worst soil.

The cultivar ‘Umbracultiformis’ has a dome-like form and could be the plant seen commonly in some wild stands. It is often sold as Texas Umbrella-Tree. It would be nice to find a fruitless selection.

Propagation is from seed or root cuttings.

Pests and Diseases

Scale, whitefly and sooty mold infest chinaberry.

Leaf spot causes premature defoliation.

References

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