

The Plantsman's Choice  
Presenting promising urban trees

# American smoke tree

The big cousin from the West

Henrik Sjöman and Andrew Hiron

The American smoke tree (*Cotinus obovatus*) is a rather rare plant in comparison to the popular and significantly more well-known smoke bush (*Cotinus coggygria*), but it certainly deserves greater attention. It is suitable for both private and public planting situations and has fantastic seasonal qualities.

The tree is rather rare in the wild and is said to be native to only the states of Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas, Missouri, Alabama and Tennessee. Despite its southern distribution it is surprisingly hardy and can be seen as far north as New York State, where plants grow in gardens and public parks. In nature the species mainly occupies warm south-facing slopes in rather dry and poor soils. There it is a pioneering species that specialises in tolerating very exposed conditions.

It mainly develops into a multi-stemmed tree of 3–5m in height, but in the United States it can reach over 10m. Early on it has a rounded habit but with age it develops a somewhat more upright, oval shape. The relatively large leaves (6–13cm) are a beautiful light green during summer and take on stunning autumn colours in yellow, orange and purple. A beautiful detail is the

new growth which is usually pinkish in hue, creating a fine colour scheme in summer in contrast to the older green leaves. The flowers, which appear during July, also have a pink tone, creating a beautiful contrast to the fresh green foliage. The flowers are a lot scarcer than on the traditional smoke bush, which in turn results in fewer but slightly larger seed heads, 15–30cm high.

In addition to having beautiful foliage with crackling autumn colours and an interesting flowering and seed display, the tree's winter appearance is also beautiful.

The sparse, and over time rough, branch structure makes the tree very useful and interesting when it is planted with shrubs and perennials as it creates a strong contrast. The species is best used as a solitary tree because its growth is less

attractive under poorer light conditions and it should be avoided in more shaded sites.

In cultivation, the American smoke tree has shown good growth in hot and dry environments, which makes it very suitable for more challenging plantings in paved environments or on green roofs, etc. However, it is very sensitive to dense and poorly drained soils.

The species may be considered a bit slow in its establishment and early development, but then it has an impressive growth rate of between 0.5m and 1m a year. It needs heat and develops especially well in warm microclimates where growth can be astonishingly strong.

Unfortunately the tree is rare and can be hard to get hold of, especially in larger sizes and numbers. By presenting it in this article we hope that we can create a greater interest in this species because of its high tolerance for some of the most challenging urban habitats and its amazing seasonal qualities. We hope to see it produced and used more widely in the future.



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*The relatively large leaves (6–13cm) are a light green during summer.*



*The American smoke tree.*

*The beautiful detail is the new growth that is usually pinkish in its tone, creating a fine colour scheme in summer, in contrast to the older green leaves.*

