

The Plantsman's Choice

Chinese poplar

A tree with rhythm



Henrik Sjöman and Andrew Hiron

When designing with trees, the focus is often on flowers, autumn colours and crown structure. However, sometimes trees have other beautiful qualities, such as being able to move in an exciting way when the wind blows the crown. One tree that really has rhythm is the Chinese poplar (*Populus simonii*), with its hanging branches that move beautifully at the slightest breath of wind.

Chinese poplar is a distinctive solitary tree. With its hanging crown structure, it gives movement and character to a site.

The upright form of the Chinese poplar puts on formidable growth which makes it an ornament all year round.



The Chinese poplar has nice seasonal qualities – here with fresh new leaves in the spring



The Chinese poplar was introduced to Europe as early as 1862. Its natural range is in central and north-eastern China where it is found in both cool and humid forests as well as in warmer and summer-dry environments. In cultivation the species is easily established, has rapid growth when young and initially becomes a narrow-crowned tree with characteristic hanging branches supported by sparsely set, horizontal, coarser branches. As it ages, it becomes slightly wider and smoother in its branch architecture, which is to its advantage when the hanging branches provide a stunning silhouette during winter. The bark is light grey, while the one-year shoots are reddish brown. The leaves burst forth quite early in spring and are elliptical with whitish undersides and glossy green upper surfaces that can contrast well with surrounding vegetation. This attractive foliage presents an exotic and noble expression during summer.

In nature, the Chinese poplar can grow up to 20m high, while in cultivation it usually reaches 12–15m. The species is considered one of the most tolerant in the genus in terms of drought and heat and it thrives well in urban climates. It can also withstand industrial environments (pollution) well, but should not be used on very windy sites, which makes it less useful for exposed coastal environments. Another characteristic that makes the species suitable for urban environments is its high tolerance for both air-borne salts and salt within the rooting environment. If there are sufficiently generous spaces below ground (rooting space), this is one of the few poplar species that can really be recommended for street environments. The species should definitely be used more than it is currently, either as a solitary tree or in group plantings, since its distinctive habitat can give a street environment a unique identity. It is available in a great variety of sizes at most tree nurseries in Europe.

***Populus simonii* 'Fastigiata'**

This upright form of the Chinese poplar was found in northern China in 1913. It is a widely used tree in central and northern Europe. The crown is upright, very dense and tapered like an egg at the base. However, at maturity, the crowns spread out considerably. The foliage is very effective when it moves in the wind. This cultivar is excellent (almost unmatched) as a wind shelter, but it should be noted that already middle-aged trees can get quite a large number of dead small branches that are at risk of falling: the problem is debris rather than dangerous branches. The tree will grow to 15–20m high.



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