

The Plantsman's Choice

Tree aralia

One of the most remarkable cool temperate trees

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The tree aralia, *Kalopanax septemlobus*, is a beautiful solitary tree for park environments where its sparse growth, thorny stems and stunning foliage create contrast and interest against other trees and shrubs.

The tree aralia is native throughout Japan, central and north-eastern China, Korea, and south-eastern and eastern Russia. It is usually found in light forests with good access to water and nutrients. In the central Chinese mountain forests, it is found in light oak forests of *Quercus aliena* where it creates an intermediate layer. The shrub layer you encounter when hiking in these oak forests usually consists of dense stands of glossy bamboo (*Fargesia nitida*). In these dense bamboo groves are the hidden stems of tree aralia with its large sharp thorns, just waiting to punish you for not paying attention.

In its natural environment, the species develops into large trees up to 30m high, with a trunk diameter exceeding 1m. Young plants and lower branches are equipped with strong, straight thorns, which is why it shares the nickname 'the devil's walking stick' with other related aralias. This means, of course, that it is not inherently suited to children's play areas.

Usually, the crown gradually splits into several sparse, coarse main stems. In winter, the species may not be the most appealing, but it creates a clear contrast to other trees with its rough, sparse and somewhat rigid form.

In summer, there are few other trees that can create such an exotic impression, with its large maple-like leaves that in young plants can be 30–45cm wide. The leaves have 5–9 lush green lobes and offer a fantastic spectacle when they unfold during the spring. Across the species' natural range, leaf size and lobe depth vary greatly between different individuals. Perhaps the most distinctive forms are the deeply lobed varieties that can almost appear palmate: these are usually named as *Kalopanax septemlobus* var. *maximowiczii*.

In August, like most aralias, it develops flocks of ball-shaped flowers in flat inflorescences that can measure almost 50cm in diameter. The flowers are creamy-white to yellowish-white and very rich in nectar, which means that it is frequently visited by nectar-collecting insects. The flowers are followed by numerous clusters of brownish-black fruits. The autumn colours are usually golden yellow with hints of red.

Tree aralia is an unusual tree that is sold in larger tree nurseries in Europe, even in fairly large sizes. Young plants are slightly sensitive to frost, while older ones are much more durable. Its use is mainly in



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parks and gardens as it requires generous rooting volumes and is sensitive to dry, nutrient-poor environments – a legacy of its ecological heritage in the forest understorey. In nature, the species shows that it can handle growing under a light-transmitting canopy, which makes it an interesting choice for naturalistic plantings where you want to create an exciting intermediate layer. Experience of the species in public plantings is relatively limited, but it should be tested much more since there are few trees that can bring such unique character to a site.



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Kalopanax septemlobus var. maximowiczii from China.