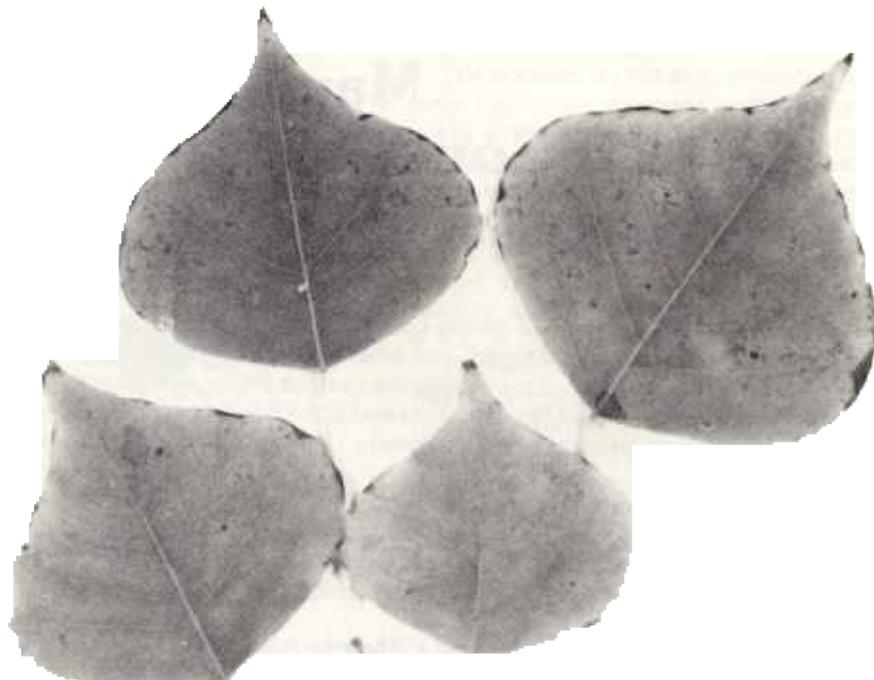


# Another Exotic Nuisance - THE CHINESE TALLOW TREE

by Steve Farnsworth



Up until now, north and central Florida has been spared the fate of south Florida — having its natural areas ravaged by exotic invader trees like the “terrible trio” — melaleuca, Brazilian pepper, and Australian pine. Freezing temperatures kept these pests at bay, while hardier exotics like camphor tree, chinaberry, and mimosa were relatively well-mannered and spread little beyond human habitations.

Chinese tallow tree, however, is spreading at an alarming rate. This tree stands now where melaleuca and Brazilian pepper were in the 1950s — small, localized, but expanding populations that, in another ten years, are apt to explode into an intractable problem of major proportions.

Chinese tallow tree, *Sapium sebiferum*, has the classical characteristics of most exotic pest plants. It grows fast, fruits when young, produces seed abundantly, grows in a wide range of soils, invades undisturbed habitats, and has traits that some people find attractive and, as a result, promote and distribute.

Its main horticultural attractions are the teardrop-shaped leaves which turn bright red and yellow in the fall, and its minimal care requirements. It has white waxy seeds in groups of three in the fall, and all parts contain a poisonous sap. A comparison with melaleuca is particularly chilling — both prefer moist areas, have been promoted and spread by beekeepers as a honey plant, and can spread widely from a single parent tree.

I first became aware of the Chinese tallow tree's pest plant potential in 1979 when I saw it popping up everywhere during a visit to the Jacksonville area. I have to confess that I was growing a few of these trees at that time as a novelty, but I destroyed them immediately as I do all exotics showing invasive potential. I suspected then that *Sapium* could become the “melaleuca”

of temperate Florida, but two recent events have confirmed my suspicions and galvanized me to take action.

The first was noticing that twelve different Florida nurseries were listing this tree for sale in a nursery publication I receive. This indicates it has been picked up by the nursery and landscape trade and will be spread throughout the state.

The clincher was a recent visit to Gainesville after an absence of several years. Coming up U.S. 441 from the south through Paynes Prairie, I saw four or five Chinese tallow trees in full fruit where there were none before. These trees were in the middle of the prairie, miles from human habitation, and I can see them taking over all the higher ground in the prairie unless something is done.

What can be done?

The first thing is to educate. Spread the word that this is an invasive exotic pest plant. This article is a first step. The second is to take action. As individuals, we can refuse to have this exotic planted on our property and can destroy them if they already exist. We can ask our neighbors, employers, and

anyone else we can influence to do the same. Landscape architects can stop including Chinese tallow tree in their landscape plans and nurserymen can cease growing it.

The third option would be to pursue legislative action. Melaleuca and Brazilian pepper have been banned by municipalities and counties in south Florida, and the same approach at a local level may work, especially as the threat from this tree becomes more obvious. Statewide legislation is unlikely, as a bill to ban melaleuca and Brazilian pepper in the nursery trade was successfully lobbied against by the Florida Nurserymen and Growers Association, who were concerned about further banning of more, or all, exotics.

I believe, however, that the Chinese tallow tree will become a serious exotic threat. The time to take action to slow its spread is now, instead of waiting ten years for it to become a problem everyone recognizes and nobody can do anything about.

(Steve Farnsworth, vice president of FNPS, owns and manages Farnsworth Farms Nursery in Lake Worth.)