



Sapindus drummondii Western Soapberry¹

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INTRODUCTION

Western Soapberry is native to central and western Texas and an excellent shade or ornamental tree, reaching 40 to 50 feet in height with an equal spread, forming a billowy, deciduous crown (Fig. 1). The crown is usually quite open showing the trunk and some major limbs but this varies from tree to tree. Not a uniformly-shaped crown, some vase-shaped, others round. The medium green, glossy leaves have downy undersides and the leaves turn a beautiful, deep, yellow-gold hue in fall. The small, yellowish-white springtime blooms appear in 6 to 10-inch terminal panicles and are followed by translucent, yellow-orange, half-inch, grape-like, clustered fruits which persist through the fall, eventually ripening to black. The low-branching habit, furrowed, red-brown to grey-brown bark covering the strong, broad trunk, and clusters of translucent berries of Soapberry provides much winter interest when the branches are bare. The common name is derived from the fact that the fruits, when crushed in water, create great quantities of suds and were used by West Indian/Mexican natives as a laundry soap, floor wax and varnish.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Scientific name: *Sapindus drummondii*
Pronunciation: SAP-in-dus drum-AWN-dee-eye
Common name(s): Western Soapberry
Family: *Sapindaceae*
USDA hardiness zones: 6 through 9 (Fig. 2)
Origin: native to North America

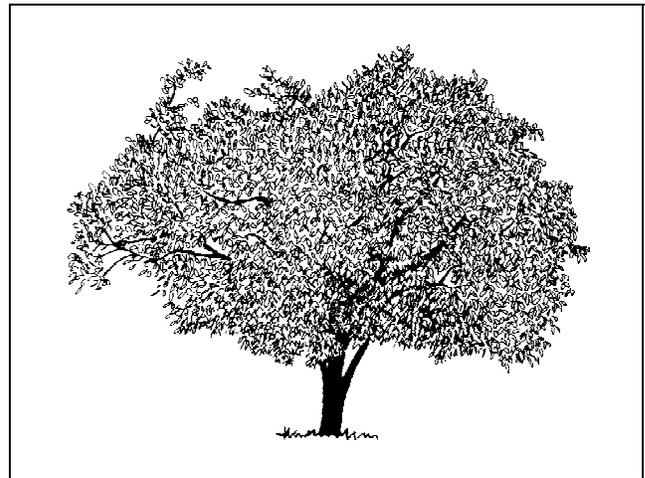


Figure 1. Middle-aged Western Soapberry.

Uses: wide tree lawns (>6 feet wide); medium-sized tree lawns (4-6 feet wide); recommended for buffer strips around parking lots or for median strip plantings in the highway; reclamation plant; shade tree; specimen; sidewalk cutout (tree pit); residential street tree; tree has been successfully grown in urban areas where air pollution, poor drainage, compacted soil, and/or drought are common

Availability: somewhat available, may have to go out of the region to find the tree

DESCRIPTION

Height: 40 to 50 feet
Spread: 40 to 50 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical canopy with a regular (or smooth) outline, and individuals have more or less identical crown forms

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Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.

Crown shape: round; vase shape

Crown density: open

Growth rate: medium

Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate (Fig. 3)

Leaf type: even pinnately compound

Leaflet margin: entire

Leaflet shape: lanceolate; oblong

Leaflet venation: pinnate

Leaf type and persistence: deciduous

Leaflet blade length: 2 to 4 inches; less than 2 inches

Leaf color: green

Fall color: yellow

Fall characteristic: showy

Flower

Flower color: white; yellow

Flower characteristics: showy; spring flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: round

Fruit length: .5 to 1 inch; < .5 inch

Fruit covering: dry or hard

Fruit color: black; orange; yellow

Fruit characteristics: attracts birds; fruit, twigs, or foliage cause significant litter; persistent on the tree; showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: grow mostly upright and will not droop; showy trunk; should be grown with a single leader; no thorns

Pruning requirement: needs little pruning to develop a strong structure

Breakage: resistant

Current year twig color: brown; gray

Current year twig thickness: medium

Culture

Light requirement: tree grows in part shade/part sun; tree grows in full sun

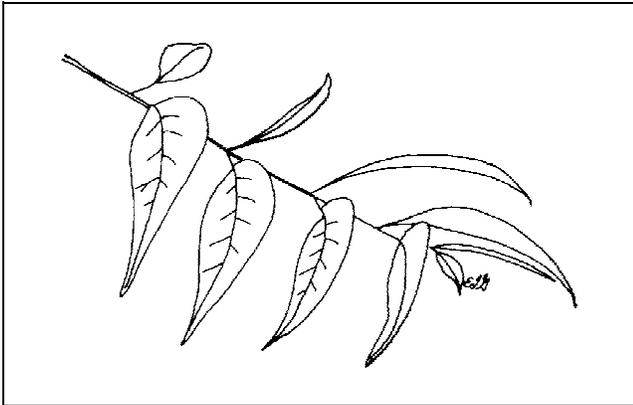


Figure 3. Foliage of Western Soapberry.

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

Drought tolerance: high

Aerosol salt tolerance: none

Other

Roots: surface roots are usually not a problem

Winter interest: tree has winter interest due to unusual form, nice persistent fruits, showy winter trunk, or winter flowers

Outstanding tree: tree has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more

Invasive potential: seeds itself into the landscape

Pest resistance: long-term health usually not affected by pests

USE AND MANAGEMENT

Fruit maintains showy orange-yellow color on the tree throughout the winter. Fruit drops while it is firm and does not rot to create a mess but people could roll on it and fall on a sidewalk. The abundant fruits may create an unwelcome invasion of seedling volunteers. Plant it in a lawn area where regular mowings prevent seedlings from developing. Due to the risk of dermatitis and possible poisoning from the fruit, use Western Soapberry as an ornamental or median-strip street tree away from where children would regularly contact the fruit.

A North American native, Western Soapberry grows in full sun or partial shade on a wide variety of soils. The crown is much denser in full-day sun. Western Soapberry is particularly well-suited to urban conditions, tolerating wind, drought, and infertile soils with ease. Transplants easily and establishes with only minimal irrigation. The close-grained, strong wood makes this tree very resistant to wind damage and adaptable to urban landscapes. Excellent for poor,

compacted or alkaline soil. Root suckers can be a problem in sandy soil but apparently not in clay.

There may be a fruitless cultivar originating in Oklahoma which would make it suitable for a much broader usage including downtown streets and patios.

Propagation is by seed or hardwood cuttings. Seedlings transplant easily.

Pests and Diseases

No pests or diseases of major concern although dwarf mistletoe can be quite a problem. One of a few plants apparently resistant to root rot. Powdery mildew, leaf spot and leaf blight have been reported in Texas but it is usually a pest-free tree.