

Western Soapberry

Sapindus saponaria var. drummondii

Secondary Names:

Wild Chinaberry, Jaboncillo

Leaf Type: Deciduous

Texas Native: Yes No

Firewise: Yes No



Tree Description:

A medium to large tree, attaining a height of 40 to 50 and a trunk diameter of 1 to 2 feet, with erect branches that form an oval or rounded crown.

Range/Site Description:

Occurs throughout Texas, but less common in the Pineywoods and the South Texas plains, growing on moist clay soils, dry limestone uplands, or along fencerows, borrow ditches, or streamsides. Sometimes forms dense thickets.

Leaf:

Alternate, once-compound, 6" to 18" long, with 4 to 9 pairs of leaflets that usually alternate on the rachis (or opposite each other, or both); leaflets are lanceolate, about 1.5" to 4" long and 0.5" to 0.75" wide, margin smooth, pale yellow-green, sometimes pubescent underneath, with prominent veins. The leaves turn yellow in the fall.

Flower:

Male and female flowers borne on separate trees as large branched clusters of white flowers 6" to 10" long; close inspection is required to tell if the flowers are male or female.

Fruit:

Female trees bear clusters of round yellowish fruits, about 0.5" in diameter, fleshy, soft, and translucent, containing dark brown seeds. Fruits ripen in September and October but persist until spring, and are poisonous if ingested.

Bark:

Gray or tan, with red-brown scales that develop into narrow plates that peel away from the trunk slightly.

Wood:

Heavy, strong, close-grained, light brown tinged with yellow. It splits easily into thin strips and is used for baskets and the frames of pack saddles.

Similar Species:

Chinese pistache (*Pistacia chinensis*) has similar leaves that turn orange or red in the fall with red clusters of berries.

Interesting Facts:

The fleshy part of the fruit is rich in "saponins," and was used by Native Americans as a soap substitute; the seeds were used to make necklace beads. The yellow fruits and the common name "wild china" often confuse this species with the non-native Chinaberry tree (*Melia azederach*). Larger trees are susceptible to being killed by the soapberry borer (*Agrilus prionurus*), a non-native pest from Mexico recently discovered in Texas.