



Meet the Chinese Pistache Tree

by Cathy Ronk, UC Master Gardener

The Chinese Pistache tree is a handsome *ornamental* shade tree with reliable autumn color that is suitable for urban and residential landscapes. It is native to China, Taiwan, and the Philippine Islands. This tree can be confused with its cousin, the *edible* pistachio nut tree. Both trees are botanical members of the cashew family: Anacardiaceae.



Interesting Facts:

- Chinese Pistache is the only tree whose leaves turn to scarlet in the desert.
- Trees are either female or male. The female trees produce dried clusters of tiny seed balls that are ¼-inch in diameter. These seed balls remain sterile unless a male tree is located nearby.
- Donald Kleim successfully grafted and introduced a popular male variety with dependable red fall color, called '**Keith Davey**.' Kleim worked for William H. Henderson, owner of Henderson Experimental Gardens-- a plant nursery in Fresno, CA. Eventually, Kleim became co-owner then full owner of the nursery. After his death, the business was sold and is currently known as Belmont Nursery.

Description:

Our Master Gardener tree list—entitled "Ornamental Trees for Home Gardens and Landscapes," describes the Chinese Pistache tree as a useful street, shade, or garden tree with good fall color and rounded shape. It is a deciduous tree, meaning it drops all of its leaves in one season. Roots are not problematic near sidewalks or driveways. This tree thrives in full sun and is relatively long-lived. It is winter-hardy to 20 degrees and is **essentially pest free** and fire resistant.



During the growing season, Chinese Pistache has attractive dark green leaves about a foot long, each comprised of 10-16 paired, narrow, 2-4 inch long leaflets. Flowers are insignificant. Shorter, cooler autumn days cause the leaves to turn shades of yellow, orange, and red.

With a moderate growth rate, a mature Chinese Pistache can reach 40-50 feet high and nearly as wide. '**Sarah's Radiance**' is a grafted *female* selection with uniform shape, increased cold tolerance and has more intense autumn color tinged with purple. It is a favorite in southwest areas with colder winters and grows to 25-40 feet tall and 25-30 feet wide.

The '**Keith Davey**' male cultivar grows slower to a height of 35-40 feet and 25-35 feet wide. Another male cultivar—'**Pearl Street**'—was patented in 1994. This variety was discovered as a chance seedling of unknown parentage growing as a planted street tree near Pearl Avenue in Modesto, California. Its distinguished features

are: faster growth rate, taller (40-45 feet), and denser, upright growing habit. **'Pair's Choice'** is a new male cultivar introduced this year. A robust growth habit results in a sturdy trunk with stout, ascending branches, and mature size of 30 feet tall and wide. Its autumn color is yellow, orange to red.

Care:

The best time to purchase a Chinese Pistache is in autumn, when container-grown trees are displaying their colorful leaves. Decide if you want a female or grafted male tree. Plant your tree anytime from then until midwinter in a location where it will receive full sun. Chinese Pistache tolerates a wide range of soil types but prefers good drainage and low amounts of water once established. Overwatered trees risk developing verticillium wilt.

Irregular branch growth is common in young Chinese Pistache trees, requiring early training and pruning. Helpful tips on how to train young trees for structure and form is available on our Master Gardener website, <http://cetulare.ucanr.edu>.

Design Tips:

As a shade tree and autumn focal point, Chinese Pistache certainly can stand alone in the garden. Planting them on the southern or western side of your home shades it in the hot summer yet allows the warm sun through in the winter. Plant at least 15 feet from any buildings.

Companion plants must accept some shade during the growing season and have similar low water needs, such as: dwarf coyote brush (groundcover), white-flowered rockrose (shrub), yellow-flowered Jerusalem sage (shrub), and strawberry tree.



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