



Meet the Smoke Tree

by Cathy Ronk, UC Master Gardener

Name:

The Smoke tree is a small tree (or large shrub) grown for its striking new foliage, unique bloom clusters, and fantastic fall color. *Cotinus obovatus* is from the eastern United States. However, *Cotinus coggygia* is more commonly planted here, despite being native to southern Europe and eastward into China. *Cotinus* 'Grace' is a hybrid cross between these two species.

Interesting Facts:

- In some areas of the United States this tree is also called Wig Tree.
- The "smoke" or "wig," from which the tree's common names are derived, is an abundance of airy, buff-to-lavender-pink puffs created by elongated hairs as the tiny greenish or cream blossoms fade.
- To create a small bush with no flowers but huge leaves, gardeners can "coppice" this plant. Coppice means "to sprout freely from the base of a plant," and is accomplished by cutting the entire bush to about 12 inches high in early spring before bud break.

Description:

Our Master Gardener tree list—entitled "Ornamental Trees for Home Gardens and Landscapes," describes the Smoke tree as a broad, urn-shaped, naturally multi-stemmed tree that is resistant to oak root fungus. It is a deciduous tree, so it drops all its leaves in one season. Ordinarily the Smoke tree grows to about 15 feet tall and wide, but eventually it may reach 25 feet in height with its moderate growth rate.

The round, and sometimes oblong, 1½-3 inch leaves of the species emerge bluish green in spring, but purple-leafed cultivars are more commonly grown. The hybrid cross (*Cotinus* 'Grace') has green foliage tinged with purple and large deep pink smoke puffs. Leaves of *Cotinus coggygia* 'Purpureus' stay plum colored on younger wood, but turn blue-green through summer on older wood. 'Royal Purple' and 'Velvet Cloak' keep their purple color most of the summer. The smoke puffs of the purple leafed trees are colored a richer purple than those of the original species. The foliage of all types change to red, orange, yellow, or copper for a spectacular fall show.



Smoke Tree



Smoke Tree Flowers

'Pink Champagne' is a green-leafed cultivar with an upright growth habit, pink smoke puffs, and red-orange fall color. The leaves of 'Velvet Cloak' are a dark wine red color that's nearly black. The most unique cultivar

is '**Golden Spirit**' (also called '**Ancot**'), with foliage that emerges lime green, matures to golden yellow, then turns to shades of coral, orange, and red in fall. It is a moderate growing, rounded shrub to 8 feet tall and 6 feet wide.

Care:

Plant fall through spring in full sun or part shade. Smoke tree tolerates a wide range of soil types but prefers good drainage. These plants actually like poor, even rocky soils. Water moderately once the soil dries in spring only until well established. The Water Use Classification of Landscape Species (WUCOLS IV) rates the Smoke tree/shrub as a "low water use" plant. The WUCOLS project was initiated and funded by the Water Use Efficiency Office of the California Department of Water Resources (DWR). Work was directed by the University of California Cooperative Extension. WUCOLS IV provides evaluations of the irrigation needs of over 3,500 plant groups used in California landscapes at www.ucanr.edu/sites/WUCOLS.

Prune plants while they are dormant in winter, but only as needed for shaping, unless you choose to coppice them, or want to "limb up" the shrub into a small tree by removing lower branches then select two to three stems that will become the multiple trunks of your small tree. The Smoke tree can be pruned to a single trunk but is naturally multi-trunked.

The Smoke tree is generally pest free. Some sources state that contact with the plant's sap can irritate skin and the leaves are poisonous if ingested.

Design Tips:

Cotinus are notable and rewarding specimens in a shrub border, flower bed, or as a featured focal point. Plant with low water use perennials and evergreens. Combine with gray-green or olive-green plants to contrast with purple-leafed cultivars. For a dramatic foliage effect, pair '**Golden Spirit**' with '**Royal Purple**.'

The Smoke tree/shrub grows well in large containers. Florists use the unique bloom clusters and branches with handsome leaf color in their compositions.

November 15, 2015