

Ceiba speciosa (A. de Saint-Hilaire) P. Ravenna
(*Chorisia speciosa*)

Floss Silktree

Other Common Names: Corisia, Kapok, Paineira-Rosa, Silk-Floss Tree.

Family: Some authorities place the *Ceiba* P. Miller in the family Bombacaceae, while others consider this a subfamily, Bombacoideae, within the Malvaceae.

Cold Hardiness: The above ground portions of this subtropical species are cold hardy in USDA plant hardiness zones 10(9) to 11, stems may return from the roots in mild winters in 8b; plants often suffer varying degrees of winter dieback in USDA zones 8b and 9b.

Foliage: Deciduous, semi-evergreen, or evergreen depending upon winter temperatures, the alternate palmately compound leaves rather remind one of the *Schefflera*; five to seven finely serrate narrowly elliptic to ovate leaflets languidly radiate from a central point at the end of a long slender stiff green petiole; petioles are one to two or more times as long as the longest leaflet; the nearly sessile to short stalked 3" to 5" (6") long leaflets are pinnately veined and medium to gray-green in color with acute to acuminate tips and acute to cuneate bases.

Flower: Flowering usually occurs only where plants are not significantly winter damaged; in flower, it is easy to see why some authorities classify this species in the Malvaceae as the 5" to 6" diameter flowers tend to resemble those of the genus *Hibiscus*; five recurved showy almost fleshy textured undulate margined ovate petals surround a short ring of stamens with an elongated distended style in the center of the flower; petals vary from a whitish yellow with a hint of pink, through varying shades of pink, to a dark rosy pink with yellow throat; the petals tend to fade in color as they age, but are very showy when in peak bloom; in the landscape flowering begins in late fall to early winter; where overwintered in containers in a greenhouse, flowering may be delayed until late winter or early spring.

Fruit: Where produced, the green oblong 6" to 8" (10") long woody capsules dry to a brown color and are dehiscent, producing small pea-shaped seeds embedded in a white fiber, hence the name Silk-Floss Tree or Floss Silktree; fruit are showy where produced, but occur infrequently in our region.

Stem / Bark: Stems — green stems are moderately stout, leaf scars are white-tan to light brown half circles to elongated V-shaped semicircles; Buds — terminals are small, $\frac{1}{8}$ " to $\frac{1}{16}$ " long, few scaled, more or less conical, and green to brown in color; lateral buds are tiny and essentially embedded in the stem above the leaf scar; Bark — initially the bark is smooth and green, later developing circular sharp-tipped spines that nearly cover the old trunks; older trunks are gray to gray brown and eventually become strongly buttressed; the form and texture of old trunks is one of the most ornamental features of this tree.

Habit: The stout swollen green trunk studded with circular prickles dominates the form of this tree; the canopy is strongly upright in youth, spreading with age to become rounded to oval; in regions with minimal frost, single trunks are common with trees reaching 40' to 50' tall, whereas multiple trunks often develop where periodic cold temperatures kill plants back severely or to the ground and plants remain in essence large shrubs or small trees; the overall texture is coarse, particularly so where deciduous in winter.

Cultural Requirements: Floss Silktree is easily grown in a sunny location where frosts are not severe; trees are very drought tolerant and soil pH adaptable, but not particularly tolerant of soil or foliar salt exposure; best growth is on well drained soils, but wet soils can be tolerated for short periods of time; protect trunks from winter frosts and cold winds; best growth is under highlight conditions, however trees are often planted under taller tree canopies in USDA zones 9a and 8b to help with winter protection; avoid damaging the swollen trunks to minimize trunk rots; growth is rapid in tropical climates, less so in colder ones.

Pathological Problems: Few disease or pest problems bother this species.

Ornamental Assets: The swollen bottle-shaped trunks, trunk spines, bright green foliage, showy flowers and fruit are all ornamental assets; when deciduous the silhouette of the swollen trunk and comparatively thinner branches is unique.

Limitations & Liabilities: Trunk spines can be a maintenance or pedestrian hazard; most trees suffer some cold damage in all but the warmest portions of our region; spent fruit can be mildly messy on manicured lawns if produced in numbers; the buttress roots and tendency for large surface roots limit its use in confined spaces.

Landscape Utilization: Largely grown as a landscape curiosity or conversation piece for patio containers in most of our region, *C. speciosa* is planted as a park, shade, street, or specimen tree in warmer climates; once

established *C. speciosa* can exist with minimal irrigation, so it works well on highway and buffer strip plantings in warm climates; *Ceiba insignis* (Kunth) C.P. Gibbs & J. Semir (White Silk-Floss Tree, *Chorisia insignis*) is a similar species with a bit less showy white-yellow regal lily-shaped flowers, and it is reported to be slightly more cold tolerant; *Ceiba insignis* is seldom available in our regional trade.

Other Comments: Grafted cultivars will ensure the desired flower color which varies widely in seedlings and grafted plants will come into bloom more quickly than seedlings; the genus name honors the 19th century Swiss botanist Ludwig Choris and the specific epithet means showy.

Native Habitat: This species is native to Brazil and southern and western South America.

Related Taxa: The genus *Ceiba* contains about 10 species of trees of which several are important in tropical landscapes around the world; the closely related genera *Bombax* L., *Chorisia* C.S. Kunth, and *Adansonia* L. also contain many popular tropical landscape trees, including the famous Baobabs which look like up-side down trees when deciduous.

References: Barwick, 2005; Dehgan, 1998; Gilman, 1996; Macoboy, 1991; Riffle, 1998; Walker, 1992.