**Schefflera actinophylla** (S.F.L. Endlicher) H.A.T. Harms

(***Brassaia actinophylla***)

**Other Common Names:** Australian Ivy Palm, Australian Umbrella Tree, Cheflera, Octopus-Tree, Queen’s Umbrella Tree, Queensland Umbrella Tree, Starleaf.

**Family:** Araliaceae.

**Cold Hardiness:** Schefflera is a tropical tree hardy in USDA zones 10 and 11, or sometimes used as a dieback shrub in very protected locations in zone 9b; Schefflera is also used extensively as an interiorscape plant in colder climates and occasionally as an annual summer foliage plant.

**Foliage:** Evergreen; alternate and denser near the terminus of stems; palmately compound; 24O to 36O long; petioles thick and stiff to 24O long; five to sixteen leaflets are present; leaflets are oblong-elliptic, (4O)6O to 8O (12O) long by 2O to 4O wide, and glabrous; the thick leaflets are a dark lustrous green which is the primary reason for the species’ landscape usage; juvenile plants tend to have fewer leaflets that are sometimes toothed or irregularly serrate and have more acute tips; the prominent midrib is a lighter green to yellow-green color than the rest of the blade; petiolules reach 3O long and are glabrous and dark green in color; individual leaves resemble umbrellas and contribute to the species’ common names.

**Flower:** Monoecious; inflorescences can be quite large, consisting of a central flower spike with more or less horizontal spikes radiating from the base; an inflorescence typically contains six to thirteen red-black to purple-black panicles which can reach 2½N or sometimes more, in length; individual fragrant small flowers are borne in short racemose clusters along the main axis, and are colored pink to red; flowers have five sepals, five petals, and five stamen (male flowers); usually plants flower only in tropical climates, but when flower they are conspicuous due to the shear size and odd shape of the inflorescence; the first time I observed mature plants in full flower was in Hawaii and it took a while to convince myself it really was the same plant I usually encountered in interiorscapes; when flowers do occur in our region, it is during summer.

**Fruit:** Fruits are more or less round ¼O to ½O diameter scarlet, purplish red, or nearly black berry-like drupes.

**Stem / Bark:** Stems — coarse; the large leaf scars are prominent; dark green in coloration with lenticels, eventually changing to a grayish color on old trunks; sparsely branched; Buds — foliose; dark green; glabrous; Bark — green becoming gray-brown to tan-brown; smooth; aerial rootlets may form on old trunks or branches with old age in humid tropical climates.

**Habit:** Where conditions permit its full growth in the U.S., *S. actinophylla* rapidly matures as a 20N to 30N tall irregularly upright oval single or multiple-trunk evergreen tree with very coarse textured foliage; reports of heights of as much as 80N come from its native land; plants tend to be leggy with age as the foliage becomes concentrated in the upper portions of the relatively sparsely branched canopy; mature trees develop billowing clumps of coarse foliage atop stout stems.

**Cultural Requirements:** Although frequently valued for its ability to tolerate moderately dense shade and moderately low light interiorscapes, *S. actinophylla* can be grown in full sun with a steady supply of moisture; growth is best in filtered shade and a rich moist well drained fertile soil; this species responds well to supplemental nitrogen in modest quantities; selective pruning may be needed to keep plants in bounds; in tropical rainforests, this species may start life as an epiphyte, ala the strangler figs (some *Ficus* spp.).

**Pathological Problems:** Mealy bugs, scale, spider mites, sooty mold, and sometimes aphids are commonly reported problems in interiorscapes and greenhouses; these pests and diseases are
typically much less frequent and infestations less severe in outdoor landscapes where natural predators can act as a check; severely cold damaged trees are prone to fungal infections.

**Ornamental Assets:** The rich lustrous dark green leaves with their bold tropical flare are the plant's primary assets; the leaves are often described as having a lacquered appearance; in tropical environments, the flowers and fruit effect can also make strong statements.

**Limitations & Liabilities:** Intolerance to cold temperatures, susceptibility to pests and its potential to become invasive in suitable tropical climates are the primary liabilities; this species tends to become overly large in smaller interiorscapes or when used in smaller containers; in the humid tropics this species may develop extensive surface roots that cause maintenance problems.

**Landscape Utilization:** In the tropics, this species can be used as a small to medium size evergreen tree; in subtropical locations, such as the Rio Grande Valley or protected locations in the immediate Gulf Coast, it is sometimes used as a dieback shrub; although *S. actinophylla* serves well as an evergreen screen, accent or windbreak in tropical landscapes, its use is often discourage as it has a propensity to naturalize and is sometimes considered to be invasive in these locales; this species is a favorite of horticultural instructors to use when demonstrating air-layering as a propagation method.

**Other Comments:** One of our most popular and versatile large coarse textured interiorscape plants; it is an old standby of the foliage industry; the genus name honors the 19th century botanist J.C. Scheffler, while the specific epithet refers either to the radial arrangement of the leaves around the stems, or according to others the radiating of the leaflets about the end of the petiole; the oddly shaped inflorescences are the root of the common name of Octopus-Tree.

**Native Habitat:** Native Southeast Asia and Australia, but widely naturalized in tropical climates.

**Related Taxa:** The genus *Schefflera* J.H. Forster & J.G.A. Forster contains 150 to over 700 species depending on whether authorities lump or split the genus; most members are woody vines, shrubs, and trees from the subtropical and tropical regions of the world.

*Schefflera arboricola* (B. Hayata) B. Hayata

Dwarf Schefflera

(Heptapleurum arboricolum)

C Also known as Arboricola, Dwarf Umbrella Tree, or Hawaiian Schefflera; Dwarf Schefflera resembles a smaller version of *S. actinophylla* with a more shrub-like habit, broader canopy, and fewer and smaller leaflets; leaflets typically number seven to eleven, are 1½Oto 4½O(6O) long on ½Oto 2Opetiolules, are obovate to nearly elliptic, and have a dark lustrous green coloration; variegated forms such as ‘Variegata’ are also popular; leaflets may be serrate to nearly entire and some cultivars are based on this trait; mature plants are irregularly rounded in habit, reaching about 6No 8No 18No in height and spread.

C Flowering rarely occurs in cultivation, but when it does the inflorescences are disappointing compared to those of *S. actinophylla* being smaller (about 12Oacross) and flatter, with tiny yellow to orange flowers, and less showy yellow-orange, orange, and eventually black berry-like drupes.

C Like *S. actinophylla*, *S. arboricola* is a tropical plant worthy of outdoor use as a woody shrub only in USDA zones (9b)10 and 11; however, due to its more petite size, this species has become very popular as an interiorscape plant and for use as a tropical patio container plant; over the years, *S. arboricola* appears to have largely supplanted *S. actinophylla* for indoor use in residential buildings, while *S. actinophylla* is still popular in larger venues; Dwarf Schefflera can be a versatile evergreen shrub in tropical landscapes and is popular as an espaliered specimen.

C *Schefflera arboricola* will tolerate full sun if a steady supply of moisture is available; *Schefflera arboricola* has a low light compensation point and performs very well in moderately dense shade,
although growth may be reduced if it is too dense; it is susceptible to similar pest and disease problems as \( S. \) actinophylla, but these are less of a problem in outdoor landscapes; plants have at least a modicum of salt tolerance; this species originates from Taiwan.

C Ironically the specific epithet “arboricola” means tree-like or of trees, even though this species is usually a shrub and is smaller than \( S. \) actinophylla; alternatively this name may reference the species’ tendency to germinate as an epiphyte in trees in the humid tropics, similarly to \( S. \) actinophylla; old limbs and trunks may develop aerial rootlets as in \( S. \) actinophylla; this species is considered to be a medicinal plant in Southeast Asia.

**Schefflera elegantissima** (Veitch ex Masters) Lowry & Frodin.  
**False Aralia**  
(Aralia elegantissima, Aralia laciniata, Dizygotheca elegantissima, Schefflera kerchoveiana)

C Also known as Elegant Schefflera, False Cannabis, Petit Boux Caledonien, or Thread-Leaf False Aralia; in outdoor landscapes, this species can potentially grow to be a medium size tree 40\( \text{N} \) or more in height, but is more typically encountered as an interiorscape plant a fraction of this size; it is a popular pot plant for its fine textured palmate foliage and it is often pruned to develop a multi-trunk form; seven to eleven narrow nearly thread-like leaflets are typically present on juvenile plants; this species seldom flowers in interiorscapes; leaflets are wavy to coarsely notched, dark glossy green above, except on the lighter midrib, and are reddish brown on the underside; the leaflets become much broader as individual plants age; most of the cultivars in the trade where selected to develop more dense compact canopies than the species type which tends to have a single trunk that branches only in the upper canopy.

C False Aralia is a tropical Schefflera sp., surviving as a woody plant only in USDA zones 10 and 11; its use in colder climates is in interiorscapes or as a tropical patio plant; this species is best grown with some shade and in a site protected from high winds, environments that would mimic its native understory habitat; scale insects are the primary pest, and in sandy soils nematode infestations are sometimes reported.

C **Schefflera elegantissima** is a native of New Caledonia; the specific epithet refers to its fine elegant appearance; the leaves are sometimes mistaken by lay persons for those of Cannabis spp.; the fine textured foliage and stems cast interesting shade patterns when grown in the tropics as a tree.


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