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## Botanical Focus: A series of articles on the flora of the Cooks Creek Watershed

### The American Smoke Tree (*Cotinus obovatus*)

By Alan Miller

*Cotinus obovatus*, the American smoke tree, is not widely used in horticulture in our area. It is a member of the cashew family—*Anicardiaceae*—which both provides us with the important food crops cashews, pistachios, and mangos and inflicts us with horrible itchy skin rashes if we are allergic to its members poison ivy, poison oak, poison sumac and others. People strongly allergic to poison ivy sometimes cannot tolerate mangos or the nuts from this family and some cannot even physically handle Chinese lacquer work, the smooth coating of which has for centuries been manufactured from the hardened sap of the



Chinese varnish tree, *Toxodendron vernicifluum*, from the same genus as poison ivy. Perhaps sensitive art lovers should be guided by the lyrics of the Coasters' song *Poison Ivy*, "You can look but you'd better not touch." Even the sap of the smoke tree can be irritating to sensitive individuals although this is uncommon.

Faced with all this misery, why should we value the American smoke tree? It is a hardy small tree with compact form, very unusual and interesting flowers, and fall color that rivals that of any temperate tree or shrub. Seldom exceeding 30 or 35 feet tall, its original native range is not certain but is now centered in small pockets of Texas, possibly the Ozarks, and the high country of the Carolina to Tennessee ridges. It was almost cut to extinction during the Civil War for the extraction of an orange to yellow dye it produces for use in making uniforms. It is cold hardy to at least zone 5—possibly even zone 3—so it could survive in many parts of Canada and it is quite suited to grow here. Perhaps forces not now known forced it into enclaves and it has not been able to re-inhabit its former range. It is dioecious, meaning that a given individual smoke tree produces either male (pollinating) or female (fruit producing) flowers. This could contribute to the fact that it seldom self-seeds or colonizes readily unless complex conditions are met. Its close relative *Cotinus coggygria*, native from southern Europe across Eurasia to the Himalayas and China, is a prominent landscape plant particularly in its purple leaf cultivars, the purple smoke tree or smoke bush. Almost any purple leaf tree or shrub will find a following in American horticulture and *C. coggygria* flowers can be larger than those of the American smoke tree but this species is more shrubby than *obovatus* and generally has inferior fall color. *Cotinus coggygria* is often used in formal gardens as a coppiced shrub, meaning cut to the ground every fall and utilized for its rapidly growing new leafy shoots, in this case, usually purple leaved. These new shoots do not bloom but form reliable perennial garden architecture. The

American smoke tree is not used in this fashion to my knowledge. Hybrids of a cultivar *C. coggygia*, 'Velvet Cloak' x *C. obovatus* by the British nurseryman Peter Drummier, particularly 'Grace', have won horticultural acclaim and are said to have fine fall color.

The leaves of the American smoke tree are blue-green and resemble larger versions of the leaves of false indigo, *Baptisia*. The bark on older specimens is quite attractive. The flowers are strange panicles up to 10 inches long with sterile hair-like elements producing a smoke like effect in the July bloom, which often persists until fall. One of the common names for the Eurasian smoke tree is the wig tree. This name is apt given the nature of the flower, but it is hard to imagine a waiting list for wigs of this material. As horticultural components, smoke tree flowers fall somewhere between weird and fascinating, depending on personal taste and how they are integrated into the landscape. The fall color is beyond dispute. In our area, it is often the purest orange to be found. This color does vary, but *Cotinus obovatus* is proven to be one of the most beautiful and reliable woody plants for fall color. When we think about its family, with sumac and even poison ivy, this is not a surprise; they all have wonderful fall color.