

SMA Selects the 2011 Urban Tree of the Year: Goldenraintree (*Koelreuteria paniculata*)

*Here are some excerpts of member testimony to the many fine qualities of the 2011 SMA Urban Tree of the Year, goldenraintree (*Koelreuteria paniculata*).*

I first became acquainted with goldenraintree (*Koelreuteria paniculata*) in southeastern Virginia where the species is commonly used as an ornamental tree in medians and landscapes. While goldenraintree has many attractive morphological features, it was the showy splendor of almost tropical-like yellow flower panicles that caught my attention on that early summer day long after the flowering cherries, dogwoods, redbuds, and azaleas had lost their spring glory.

Goldenraintree is very drought tolerant once established and well suited to urban soil conditions including pH extremes (4.5-8.0), coarse to fine texture, and compacted soils with low organic content and fertility. It is also reasonably free of insects and diseases and requires little pruning to maintain a uniform crown symmetry and safe branch structure. In youth, the tree is irregular in form and the species has a propensity to develop a very pronounced trunk sweep, so hand selection at nurseries is critical in selecting trees that are suitable for street use. While not inordinately susceptible to ice damage, the branch attachment on young stems is weak, rendering newly planted goldenraintrees prone to vandalism. I observed this characteristic firsthand when my superintendent in Norfolk gently "leaned" on a lower scaffold limb on a 4-inch (10-cm) caliper park tree, separating the branch from its trunk collar.

—**David Sivyer, Forestry Services Manager, Milwaukee, Wisconsin**

On West State Street near Meadow Street and on many streets in Ithaca, you will now see the glorious yellow blooms of the goldenraintree. This small to medium-sized tree that hails from China, Japan, and Korea is one of the few trees that bloom in mid-summer.

We can thank Thomas Jefferson for introducing goldenraintree to this country. It is recorded that on June 12, 1809, Jefferson received seeds of *Koelreuteria* from France and had a tree growing from them two years later at his home in Monticello, Virginia.

Although it was reintroduced several times after that, we can thank Thomas Jefferson's love of plants for this very tough urban tree.

We now know that it is one of the most drought and heat tolerant trees and grows well all over the United States except where the winter temperature drops below -20 F (-29 C). It grows well in most soils except where drainage is poor. It is not a large tree, commonly reaching 20 feet (6 m) or, rarely, 40 feet (12 m) on a good site. In Ithaca, we grow it under utility wires with no problems and have transplanted it successfully bare root at small (1.5 inch/38 mm) caliper.

In Ithaca, in addition to the common goldenraintree, we have two variants, the cultivar 'September' and 'Rose Lantern.' Both these trees bloom later into the early fall and 'Rose Lantern's seedpods are a beautiful pink color before they turn tan. —**Dr. Nina Bassuk, Director, Urban Horticulture Institute, Cornell University and Chair, Ithaca Shade Tree Advisory Committee**

Koelreuteria paniculata has been an adaptable medium-sized tree for us. Its eye-catching flowers usually peak here in late June and early July. Thus, it's no coincidence that we lined the July 4th parade route with goldenraintrees some years ago. They now provide a spectacular setting for the annual parade. The flowers remind me of bombs bursting in air.

Some of our goldenraintrees also draw calls each year for their pink “flowers” (seedpods) later in summer (probably ‘Rose Lantern’, though they weren’t marked as such when we purchased them). The immature seed pods on many trees are just as colorful and eye-catching as the flowers themselves. The mature fruit later provides excellent winter texture. The species is tolerant of many soils, and is not bothered by occasional drought, salt, or subzero temperatures.

Our biggest challenge is finding nurseries that know how to grow goldenraintree for street-side use. It can be rather decurrent in form without proper training in the nursery. Fortunately, more and more nurseries have figured out how to create single stemmed, well structured trees that will be able to spread their broad limbs over passing traffic and pedestrians. —**Steve Cothrel, Superintendent of Parks & Forestry, Upper Arlington, Ohio**

Goldenraintree is a versatile, medium-sized tree that grows well in a wide variety of climate conditions, tolerates varying soil types, and can take drought and wind. If given adequate rooting space (minimum 5 foot/1.5 m parkway, median, or cutout), it makes an attractive and tough 25 x 25 foot/7.6 x 7.6 m shade tree for inland, coastal, and even some mountain region landscapes in the West. —**Stan Baczynski, Construction Inspector, Port of San Diego, California**