

Tree of the Month, January 2017: Paper mulberry, tapa cloth tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*)

Paper mulberry is beautiful throughout the seasons. Fuzzy, round, green inflorescences with silky pink stamens (on female trees) and long green catkins (on male trees) appear in spring as the new leaves unfurl. Even within a single tree, the leaves are highly variable, from entire to lobed or mitten-shaped. Red fruit clusters appear in autumn, contrasting with the yellow-green and brown striped bark, which provides year-round interest. The bark has also been used in Asian fiber arts and medicine for centuries.

Paper mulberry is a member of the mulberry family (Moraceae) and is native to China, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and India. This deciduous tree can grow 10-20 meters tall and is dioecious (each tree is either male or female).

As the common name and specific epithet suggest, *Broussonetia papyrifera* (meaning “to carry or bring paper” in Latin) is used to make paper. The inner bark is harvested from young trees, beaten into a paste, mixed with mucilage from another plant, often *Abelmoschus manihot* (a member of the hibiscus family), and spread flat on screens to dry. *Broussonetia papyrifera* has been used for papermaking in China since 100 AD, in Korea since 130 AD, and in Japan since 600 AD.

Broussonetia papyrifera was introduced to the Pacific Islands over 1000 years ago and was cultivated to make a textile known throughout the islands as “tapa cloth”. To make tapa cloth, the inner bark is harvested from young trees in strips, which were pounded flat, glued together in sheets and painted with intricate patterns. In the past, tapa cloth was used for making clothing, but today it is mainly used ceremonially, as cotton and other imported fabrics are much more popular for daily wear. *Broussonetia papyrifera* was carried as far as Hawai‘i, New Zealand, the Pitcairn Islands and Rapa Nui (Easter Island), and genetic studies of the trees that grow on those islands today can help us recreate the paths of early human migration from Asia to the Pacific Islands.

In China and India, *Broussonetia papyrifera* is used medicinally. The leaves have been used traditionally as a laxative, the fruits made into a tonic, the bark taken to treat dysentery and haemorrhage, and the latex applied to eczema, bee stings and bites from snakes and dogs.

At VanDusen, paper mulberry can be found in the Fern Dell (see map on reverse).

