

WEEKLY UPDATE - MAY 15 - MAY 21, 2015

Garden Highlight – The Princess Tree (*Paulownia tomentosa*)

It has been a while since the Princess Tree was featured as Tree of the Month so perhaps a little update is appropriate, especially as the specimens in the garden are blooming so beautifully and starting to leaf out.

The Princess Tree, also known as the Empress Tree or Foxglove Tree, was named in honour of the Grand Duchess Anna Pavlovna of Russia who became the husband of Prince Willem of the Netherlands. A deciduous tree native to central/Western China, it was first brought to Europe by the East India Trading Company of the Netherlands and subsequently to North America in the 1830's where it was planted extensively as an ornamental tree in city parks and gardens and on large estates.

The fragrant, light purple flowers (panicles) are produced before the leaves which are themselves sometimes mistaken for catalpa leaves. After flowering, the panicles produce numerous seed capsules and a single tree can produce more than a million tiny, winged seeds which are dispersed by wind and water. Resembling open pistachio nut shells, the dried panicles are visible throughout the winter.

The Princess Tree can survive wild fires because the roots will regenerate fast-growing suckers; it is drought and pollution tolerant and will grow very quickly even in poor soil. However, it struggles to survive if it is shaded by taller trees.

Most of us are familiar with the Chinese custom of planting a Princess Tree when a baby girl is born; when she to be married, the tree is cut down and the wood used to make items for her dowry, e.g. furniture, chests and dishes. But it is also said that the mythical Phoenix will land only on a Princess Tree and only when a good ruler is in power.

In the 19th century, the seeds were often used as a packing material by Chinese porcelain exporters; seeds escaped and trees would grow along transportation routes. Because of high seed counts and the ease and speed of growth, *P. tomentosa* is considered to be an invasive species in some parts of the world, especially since it will displace native species.

The Princess Tree has received the Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit.