

Ailanthus altissima

[Synonyms : *Ailanthus cacodendron*, *Ailanthus glandulosa*, *Ailanthus japonica*, *Ailanthus peregrina*, *Ailanthus vilmoriniana*, *Toxicodendron altissimum*]

TREE-OF-HEAVEN is a deciduous tree. Native to northern China and to Mongolia it has small greenish-cream flowers.

It is also known as Ailanthus, Ailanto, China sumac, Chinese sumach, Chinese tree-of-heaven, Copal tree, Devil's walking stick, False varnish tree, *Götterbaum* (German), *Gudaträd* (Swedish), Heavenwood, *Jumaltenpuu* (Finnish), *Lisān-at-tair* (Arabic), *Pajasan cizí* (Czech), *Pajasan žláznatý* (Czech), *Pajaseň cudzi* (Slovak), Paradise tree, Stinking chun, Tillow tree, Tree of the gods, Varnish tree, and *Xumak falz* (Maltese).

Warning – excessive doses can cause purging then vomiting and general debility. It should only be taken internally under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. The leaflets and flowers can cause dermatitis.

Altissima means 'tallest or very tall'.

Many of the common names other than Tree-of-heaven are misnomers as this tree has never been a source of either copal or varnish. But the name Tree-of-heaven is said to be an allusion to the high altitudes at which it can be found in its native surroundings.

Tree-of-heaven was introduced to the United States, first from China in 1784 and then from England (where it is said to have been cultivated since the middle of the 18th Century) in 1820. In North America its initial popularity temporarily disappeared because of the smell of the flowers and also because of the inchworms or caterpillars which fell on those intrepid enough to venture beneath. Enthusiasm was only rekindled when nurserymen concentrated their sales on the female trees thus avoiding the offending (and offensive) male flowers. The tree's overall popularity was probably derived from its rapid growth, the ease with which it can be cultivated from seed, and its resistance to disease and pollution – all of which make it a useful shade-tree for urban planners. Appreciation of these factors continues to the present day and tree-of-heaven can be found growing in many of the world's leading cities including Hong Kong, London, New York, Paris, Sydney and Tokyo. It is also valued in many countries for erosion control and can be seen on Europe's alpine slopes. It is reported as being grown for this purpose too in the vicinity of the Black Sea. One authority points out however that the enthusiasm is not universal as the State of Victoria, in Australia (unlike New South Wales), views the tree with horror as a noxious weed and bans its cultivation.

In France the leaflets were food for the caterpillar known as the Ailanthus Moth which produced a less expensive durable silk (compared with that from the mulberry, *Morus nigra*). When however the tree was introduced to England in the 18th Century with this same purpose in mind (Jesuit missionaries sent seeds from Nanking in 1751) the attempt proved to be unsuccessful. [On the other hand it is understood that in its native land China the leaves have provided food for a particular species of silkworm which is said to spin a high quality silken thread.]

The leaflets have also been used for making paper, and have yielded a yellow wool dye.

Honey originating from the tree-of-heaven has a cat-like smell but is said to taste delightful after it has been allowed to stand.

The fairly hard, yellowish-grey wood is used in some countries for charcoal and fuel. It has also been used for general construction work, and for making cellulose. Further it has provided material for fishing boats, as well as for making furniture, matches, clogs and other small items.

Medicinally, the bark's possible qualities were not identified until 1859 in France. It was used in the treatment of dysentery, diarrhoea, bowel disorders, some heart disorders, tapeworm, asthma and epilepsy, as well as gonorrhoea and leucorrhoea. As however it can be poisonous in large doses it fell into disuse (the cure almost being worse than the ailment). But it is still used in Chinese medicine not least in anti-cancer drugs.