

# NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY OF TEXAS

## Lindheimer Chapter

PLANT OF THE MONTH  
OCTOBER, 2011

### AMERICAN SMOKE TREE, *COTINUS OBOVATUS*



USDA Range Map: Texas

American Smoke Tree gets its common name from the smoky appearance of its large feathery flower clusters appearing in the spring. However, it is a desirable ornamental during much of the year. In addition to the attractive spring bloom, its leaves turn orange, gold or scarlet in the fall, and its dark flaking bark and gnarled form give it an interesting appearance in winter. Besides Texas, it is also found in the Ozarks, Tennessee, Kentucky, northern Alabama and Georgia, west to Oklahoma, but is generally uncommon in its natural range. In Texas it occurs naturally in only a few counties on the Edwards Plateau in rocky soils on northern and eastern facing slopes.

Smoke Tree is usually found as a small tree or large shrub, 15' – 30' tall. In its natural growing conditions it is a very slow grower. This results in tough, rot resistant wood that has been used for fence posts and tool handles. However in cultivation, with rich soil and plenty of water, it grows quickly leading to brittle wood. The wood is a yellowish color, and yields a yellow dye that was used extensively during the Civil War, which led to the relative scarcity of this species in its natural range.

A related species, the European Smoke Tree (*C. coggygria*), is widely planted as an ornamental in the eastern US. It has showier blooms, but lacks the fall color of our native species. As in nature, plant the American Smoke Tree in a dry, rocky soil, where it is protected from the hot afternoon sun. Once established, do not over water. It is generally disease and insect resistant but will be browsed by deer, so give it protection.