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In our Collection

Cotinus obovatus

Matthew McDermitt, Curatorial Assistant

Selecting a favorite species from the vast living collections of the Arnold Arboretum can prove a daunting task for a woody plant enthusiast like me. Admittedly, my “favorite” can change from day to day, but I always seem to come back to *Cotinus obovatus*, the American smoketree. I have a fond memory of encountering a mature specimen of the species as an undergraduate on a sunny autumn day at the University of Delaware Botanic Garden, and savoring its vibrant foliage display. I cannot wait to experience the same effect from the specimens here at the Arboretum.

The American smoketree is a member of the Anacardiaceae, an interesting plant family noted for containing some economically important crops like mangos and cashews alongside more noxious ones like poison ivy and poison sumac. It occurs in the wild in higher-elevation areas of the south-central United States. Its contemporary range is quite limited, although it does not face the harvest pressures it experienced prior to the Civil War when its wood was used extensively in the production of yellow dyes. Growing with a multi-trunked habit, American smoketree reaches a maximum height of 35 feet. Its tiny flowers emerge on long panicles in summer and offer insignificant ornamental value. The real show—the “smoke” of the smoketree—comes from the billowy hairs attached to elongated stalks on the spent flower clusters that turn a beautiful pink as summer progresses. The effect can persist into fall, when its foliage can delight the eye with hues of yellow, red, orange, and purple.

The Eurasian cousin of our native species, *C. coggygria*, finds extensive use in American landscapes along with *C. ‘Grace’*, a hybrid of the two species. ‘Grace’ displays the showier



Photo by Kyle Port

inflorescences of the Eurasian species, but for me the excellent form and unparalleled fall color of our native smoketree give it the edge. With a preference for native plants gaining ground in the garden industry, I believe that *C. obovatus* deserves more credit and more widespread use as an ornamental plant in American gardens.

Arboretum accession 402-95*B (above) is located on Peters Hill along the path that runs northeast from Peters Hill Road. I encourage you to take a few moments on your next Arboretum visit to view this magnificent shrub and see for yourself what some call the most impressive fall foliage of any plant in the world. For a broader appreciation of the diversity of the genus, take a stroll among the Arboretum’s impressive display of *Cotinus* species, hybrids, and cultivars growing along Meadow Road, just a short walk from the Hunnewell Building. 