

Litchi chinensis: Lychee¹

Edward F. Gilman, Dennis G. Watson, Ryan W. Klein, Andrew K. Koeser, Deborah R. Hilbert, and Drew C. McLean²

Introduction

This attractive fruit tree has particularly handsome, dark green, glossy, evergreen leaves, five to eight inches long, and forms a compact, round-headed canopy. New leaves are an attractive bronze red. Lychee trees can eventually reach 30 to 50-feet in height with a 30 to 50-foot spread but will reach about 30 feet tall 30-years after planting in a landscape creating a wonderful shade, framing, or specimen tree. Small, greenish white to yellow flowers appear in drooping, 1 to 2 ½-foot-long panicles in early spring and are followed by clusters of delicious, 1 ½-inch-diameter fruit in late June and July. When ripe, the warty outer surface of the fruit turns strawberry red and becomes brittle. Easily peeled, the interior sweet, juicy, white flesh surrounds a single, large, glossy brown seed. The trees are quite decorative when laden with fruit. Consider locating the tree in the backyard if you are planting on a residential lot. This will prevent passerby's from helping themselves to the delectable fruit.

General Information

Scientific name: *Litchi chinensis*

Pronunciation: LEE-chee chih-NEN-sis

Common name(s): lychee

Family: Sapindaceae

USDA hardiness zones: 10A through 11 (Figure 2)

Origin: native to southern China

UF/IFAS Invasive Assessment Status: not considered a problem species at this time, may be recommended (North, Central, South)

Uses: hedge; fruit; specimen; screen; container or planter; deck or patio



Figure 1. Full Form - *Litchi chinensis*: lychee
Credits: UF/IFAS

1. This document is ENH-523, one of a series of the Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date November 1993. Revised December 2018. Visit the EDIS website at <https://edis.ifas.ufl.edu> for the currently supported version of this publication.
2. Edward F. Gilman, professor emeritus, Environmental Horticulture Department; Dennis G. Watson, former associate professor, Department of Agricultural and Biological Engineering Department; Ryan W. Klein, graduate assistant, Environmental Horticulture Department; Andrew K. Koeser, assistant professor, Environmental Horticulture Department, UF/IFAS Gulf Coast Research and Education Center; Deborah R. Hilbert, graduate assistant, Environmental Horticulture Department, GCREC; and Drew C. McLean, biological scientist, Environmental Horticulture Department, GCREC; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. For more information on obtaining other UF/IFAS Extension publications, contact your county's UF/IFAS Extension office. U.S. Department of Agriculture, UF/IFAS Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A & M University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Nick T. Place, dean for UF/IFAS Extension.



Figure 2. Range

Description

Height: 30 to 50 feet
Spread: 30 to 50 feet
Crown uniformity: symmetrical
Crown shape: round, spreading
Crown density: dense
Growth rate: moderate
Texture: medium

Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate
Leaf type: odd-pinnately compound; made up of 4-8 leaflets
Leaf margin: entire
Leaf shape: elliptic to lanceolate



Figure 3. Leaf - *Litchi chinensis*: lychee
 Credits: UF/IFAS

Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: broadleaf evergreen, evergreen
Leaf blade length: 5 to 8 inches; leaflets are 2 to 3 inches
Leaf color: emerge bronze red, become dark green and shiny on top and grayish green underneath
Fall color: no color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: greenish white to yellow
Flower characteristics: showy; emerges in clusters on 1-2 ½' long, terminal panicles
Flowering: spring



Figure 4. Flower - *Litchi chinensis*: lychee
 Credits: UF/IFAS

Fruit

Fruit shape: round to heart-shaped
Fruit length: 1 ½ inch
Fruit covering: fleshy drupe; warty outer skin
Fruit color: strawberry red
Fruit characteristics: does not attract wildlife; showy; fruit/leaves a litter problem
Fruiting: summer



Figure 5. Fruit, Immature - *Litchi chinensis*: lychee
Credits: UF/IFAS



Figure 6. Fruit - *Litchi chinensis*: lychee
Credits: UF/IFAS

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/branches: branches droop; not showy; typically multi-trunked; no thorns
Bark: gray and smooth
Pruning requirement: needed for strong structure
Breakage: resistant
Current year twig color: green
Current year twig thickness: thin
Wood specific gravity: unknown



Figure 7. Bark - *Litchi chinensis*: lychee
Credits: Gitta Hasing, UF/IFAS

Culture

Light requirement: full sun
Soil tolerances: clay; sand; loam; acidic; slightly alkaline; well-drained to occasionally wet
Drought tolerance: moderate
Aerosol salt tolerance: none

Other

Roots: not a problem
Winter interest: no
Outstanding tree: yes
Ozone sensitivity: unknown
Verticillium wilt susceptibility: unknown
Pest resistance: resistant to pests/diseases

Use and Management

The tree may be located near a patio, in a shrub border, or as an accent in the lawn. The thick canopy also makes it well-suited as a screen. Spaced 20 to 30 feet apart, they make a nice median or boulevard tree.

Easily grown in full sun on deep, fertile, well-drained soil, lychee should be located where it can be protected from strong winds. The dense canopy can catch the wind and the tree can topple over in strong wind. Proper thinning can help prevent this. Plants should receive regular watering and fertilization, as iron deficiency can show in alkaline soil.

Several named cultivars are available for best fruit production: 'Brewster', 'Mauritius', 'Sweet Cliff', 'Kate Sessions', and 'Kwai Mi'.

Propagation is by air-layering.

Pests

Scales.

Diseases

Mushroom root rot can be a problem on soils where oaks were grown.

Reference

Koeser, A.K., Friedman, M.H., Hasing, G., Finley, H., Schelb, J. 2017. Trees: South Florida and the Keys. University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.