The Chitalpa, *Chitalpa tashkentensis* is a small to medium shade tree that grows well in warmer climates of the Intermountain West, including extreme southern Utah (Washington County). Mature size ranges from 20-25 feet tall and 15 -20 feet wide. Blossoms form in early Summer and persist until frost. Flowers are bell shaped (almost orchid like in appearance) and range in color from white to pink. It is recommended for USDA Zones 6-9. Where trees have been planted in colder areas of Utah they usually dieback in winter and sometimes regrow from the root.

**Origin**
The Chitalpa is a cross between the Desert Willow *Chilopsis linearis* and the Northern Catalpa *Catalpa*.

*Northern Chitalpa.*

*Desert Willow.*
speciosa or bignonoides. The cross was made by A. Rusanov of the Uzbek Academy of Sciences in Uzbekistan (of the former Soviet Union). The cross occurred in 1964, and the tree was introduced to the United States in 1977 by Robert Hebb of the New York Botanical Garden. Hebb originally brought two cuttings each of different clones from overseas. Both were named Chitalpa, and were later separated with the white flowering one known as “Morning Cloud” and the pink flowering as “Pink Dawn.”

In 1991 Jianhua Li, Suzanne Shoup, and Thomas Elias set out to confirm the origin of Chitalpa. They found that genes of both parents (Chilopsis and Catalpa) exist in Chitalpa. Indicating that the Chilopsis x Catalpa cross brought forth a hybrid with desirable features of both plants, something that does not happen often. Plants have since been propagated by cuttings to preserve the integrity of the cross.

Concerns
The Chitalpa is a desert tree and is known to be drought tolerant. Splitting of the bark has sometimes occurred particularly when planted in a lawn. Too much water causes excessive growth in a single season, that may lead to this bark cracking. Cracks often attract boring insects which can further damage trees.

Summer heat brings on a “leaf scorch” symptom on Chitalpa. Scorch is a word often associated when leaf margins turn brown if landscape plants are exposed to high heat. This is thought to happen when plants do not receive enough water to keep up with evapotranspiration (moisture lost though leaves). In 2006 these symptoms were first associated with a disease known as “Chitalpa Leaf Scorch” in New Mexico. It is believed to be caused by a bacterium known as Xyella fastidiosa. Once the bacteria enters the plant they plug up the xylem vessels, known to be the water conducting vessel within the plant. This explains why infected trees look like they are suffering from drought stress. The disease was confirmed in grapes later the same year (known as Pierce’s Disease). In 2010 it was also confirmed in Catalpa and Peach.

“Chitalpa Leaf Scorch” is thought to be transmitted by xylem-feeding insects, namely the “Glassy-winged” and “Smoke-tree” sharpshooters. Since these two insects are not native to New Mexico, it is also possible rather than becoming infected in the landscape, trees may become infected in the nursery. Since Chitalpa is propagated vegetatively, it is also possible that young plants are being grown from infected cuttings.

Every Summer numerous Chitalpa trees in Southern Utah exhibit the symptoms of “Chitalpa Leaf Scorch.” While once thought to be mainly a cosmetic disease, now it is clear that infected plants may lose 20-50% of their leaves. In some years trees will grow new leaves once temperatures cool in the Fall (i.e., 2019). Reducing plant stress with proper watering and fertilizing practices should help prolong the life of Chitalpa trees. However, it is important to note that there is currently no cure for “Chitalpa Leaf Scorch” and infected plants may decrease in vigor over time and possibly decline.

Advice for Homeowners
Before purchasing Chitalpa homeowners need to realize that it may be a short-lived tree. Where Chitalpa is already in the ground, water and fertilize appropriately.
Healthy Chitalpa tree.

Advice for Plant Industry Workers
Nursery workers should give serious thought as to how much they should promote Chitalpa as a landscape tree. If widespread decline occurs it could result in major tree loss to the urban forest.

References


Missouri Botanical Garden Chitalpa tashkentensis http://www.missouribotanicalgarden.org/PlantFinder/PlantFinderDetails.aspx?kempercode=e826

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