

Chinese Toon

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I would think that a tree described as “one of the world’s most desirable timber trees”¹ would be a popular choice for many tree croppers to grow. When you add in that it has tasty spring leaves, has high levels of a wide range of nutrients, has medicinal uses and is easy to propagate and grow, it is even more likely. However if members are already growing it, the selection will probably have been made based on its aesthetic qualities, as its edible and medicinal benefits are not well known among New Zealanders. During spring, Chinese toon (*Toona sinensis* syn. *Cedrela sinensis*) becomes very noticeable as its bright pink leaves stand out among other spring growth, which is often the main reason this tree is planted in people’s gardens. When the leaves darken and green up, it is no longer so noticeable.

In its native habitat, which includes many parts of Southeast Asia, it often grows in riparian areas, on disturbed ground and on hillsides. Although most books recommend “deeply-worked, organically-enriched, free-draining soil in full sun, protected from wind,”² I see it grown in all sorts of conditions so I believe it is not that fussy. Also, as it is grown as an ornamental in many parts of the world, including places like Paris, I believe it would be able to grow in all parts of New Zealand. A Canadian website selling the seed for use as an edible vegetable says it may need protection in extreme conditions in parts of Canada and Northern USA.³ Comparatively, few areas in New Zealand would get that cold, although the wind may shred the leaves.

In China the toon is known as a ‘tree vegetable’ or Hsiang Chun Ya (Xiang Chun Ya) and it has a strong onion-like smell that is noticeable if you break off a shoot or even weed around the plant. I first noticed it when working in a friend’s garden about 30 years ago. I wondered at the time if it was possibly edible but wasn’t game to try. Traditionally the vegetable was stir-fried, or pickled, but it can also be cooked in a variety of ways or used in salads and as an edible garnish. Unfortunately I don’t really have room in my place for one - living on less than 1000 m² is a serious disadvantage for a tree cropper. However it is on my wish list and a possibility if I remove enough trees to make a space.

Seeds are sold by several companies, directed at the vegetable market. Sutton Seeds sell it in the James Wong collection, calling it the beef and onion plant.⁴ Suttons describe the leaves as tasting like “beef and onion crisps”, although unless dried or fried it won’t have the texture.

The Canadian seed company Kitazawa seed⁵ is offering it for sale as a vegetable crop, suggesting it can be grown in tunnel houses for a winter crop. Apparently it is grown in tunnel houses in China and is offered for the Chinese New Year. It is also processed by pickling, canning and dehydrating and is exported overseas. It is even suggested that it is grown for consumption as sprouted seeds. After lockdown, I must check in some of the local Chinese grocery shops to see if they stock the leaves. The fresh young leaves and shoots contain 84% water, 9.8% protein, Vitamin C, Vitamin A, Vitamin B1 and B2, and are rich in aromatic substances.⁶ The World Vegetable Centre website describes its nutritional attributes: beta-carotene: medium to high in tender shoots; vitamin E: extremely high; riboflavin: low; folic acid: low; ascorbic acid: high to extremely high; calcium: high; iron:

high; protein: 6.3-9.8%. Leaves and shoots contain also gallic acid, gallotannins, and flavonoids.⁷

As for its medicinal qualities, the fruit, bark and leaves are used in Traditional Chinese medicine and it is reported that extracts from the leaves of *Toona sinensis* have shown potential in the treatment of prostate cancer.⁸

Although you can buy the seeds, why bother? First check if by chance you have it on your property and if not, check with neighbours and fellow NZTCA members. Otherwise it is available for sale from a number of sources, but the only one I found that does promote its edible qualities and potential is Kahikatea Farm.⁹

One complaint by some people is that it suckers vigorously, however the suckers are easy to propagate from. It is also easy to pick new-grown shoots for consumption from the suckers. What could be a nuisance for some people might be to your advantage. In fact, encouraging a good number of suckers by cutting off the main trunk would be a suitable method for producing a commercial volume of edible shoots under cultivation.

However as tree croppers, growing good timber has always been part of our aim. The timber is hard and reddish "suitable for furniture making, cabinetwork, decorative veneers, racing boats, musical instruments, and patternmaking"¹⁰ It is also used for sieve hoop-making and in bridge construction.¹¹ It is a member of the Meliaceae and is suitable for use where previously mahogany, now endangered, was used. The main cultivar grown in New Zealand is an Australian selection, 'Flamingo', chosen for its bright pink spring foliage. There may be other selections out there that would have a better flavour or texture, and some may want to investigate that. Kitazawa Seed say that the purple or red varieties are more aromatic and less fibrous.

What more could a tree cropper want? A tree that provides a valuable food source while producing high quality timber at the same time.

¹ **Trees for fruit and foliage** Stirling Macoboy

² Palmer's Manual of Trees, Shrubs & Climbers by Stanley J Palmer 1994 edition

³ https://www.kitazawaseed.com/seed_1021-240.html

⁴ https://www.suttons.co.uk/james-wong/all/beef-and-onion-plant-seeds_MH-53224

⁵ https://www.kitazawaseed.com/seed_1021-240.html

⁶ https://www.kitazawaseed.com/seed_1021-240.html

⁷ <https://avrdc.org/chinese-toon-toona-sinensis/>

⁸ <https://www.glasgowbotanicgardens.com/projects/national-tree-collections-of-scotland/tree-trail-online/2-chinese-mahogany/>
and

⁹ <https://kahikateafarm.co.nz/product/chinese-toon-tree/>

¹⁰ <http://tropical.theferns.info/viewtropical.php?id=Toona+sinensis> reference from Tropical Timbers of the World Ag. Handbook no 607 by Martin Chudnoff

¹¹ http://www.efloras.org/florataxon.aspx?flora_id=2&taxon_id=200012513

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