Cecropia obtusifolia Bertol.

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CECROPIACEAE (CECROPIA FAMILY)

Cecropia schiediana Kl., *C. bicolor* Kl., *C. digitata* Ten. Ex Miq., *C. commutata* Schott, ex Miq., *C. mexicana* Hemsl., *C. panamensis* Hemsl., *C. vogeleri* Burret, *C. mexicana* var *macrostachya* Donn. Sm.

Bitâk, chancharro, chupacté, guarumbo, guarumo, hormiguillo, koochlé, trompetillo

Cecropia contains about 60 species and is one of the genera most characteristic of the American tropics. *Cecropia obtusifolia* is normally found in pioneer stages of secondary forests, sometimes forming pure stands on both coasts from Central Mexico to northern South America (Burger 1977).

Cecropia obtusifolia is a fast-growing (2 to 3 m per year) pioneer tree species. The tree reaches 10 to 20 m in height and 25 to 50 cm d.b.h. with stout, seldom-branching trunks and gray to white bark. *Cecropia obtusifolia* has few major branches and the young branches are very stout, minutely cinereous to glabrate, and hollowing, hosting nests of Azteca ants. Leaves are simple, alternative, four-ranked, with large stipules covering young leaves; petioles are very long; and blades are eccentrically peltate. Mature leaves are 30 to 50 cm wide with 9 to 13 lobes. Usually inhabited by aggressive biting ants, the tree's tall, few-branched habit with the very large umbrella-like leaves produces a striking silhouette. It grows well in a wide range of soils, poorly or well drained. The species thrives in areas of high rainfall (2000 to 3600 mm per year) or high soil moisture and average temperatures that vary from 22 to 24 °C; it is found at elevations ranging from the lowlands to about 1300 m.

The soft, fast-decaying wood of *C. obtusifolia* is sometimes used for wood pulp. The larger trunks are sometimes split and used as water troughs, and the bark contains a tough fiber used to make coarse ropes (Allen 1956). The leaves are used in Costa Rica to prepare an infusion used to lose weight. The species has also been used in agglomerate panels and paper pulp, but the high content of gums and resins in the wood complicate industrial use.

Cecropia obtusifolia begins to flower and fruit when the trees are 5 to 6 years old. It blooms throughout most of the year (Pennington and Sarukhan 1968). In the Pacific southern region of Costa Rica, most flowering frequently occurs from August to November (Allen 1956). In the Atlantic-mid region of Turrialba, Costa Rica, flowering peaks from mid-November through July and fruiting occurs from August through October and from November through July (San Román 1987). The minute dioecious flowers appear in axillary inflorescences of spadiceous spikes in digitate clusters. Fruiting spikes are 10 mm thick and fruits are about 2 mm long and 1.2 mm wide, usually flattened, abruptly rounded at the base and apex, smooth surfaced, and surrounded by a fleshy tissue of the perianth. Species dispersal is enhanced by the production of fruit throughout much of the year. These fruits are eaten and dispersed by bats and birds. In Chiapas, Mexico, the seeds are dispersed in the excreta of *Philander opossum* and *Didelphis marsupialis* at distances of 60 m (Medellin 1994). The seeds remain viable in the substrate for 1 year, then germination drops drastically to 3 percent.

Because *C. obtusifolia* is dispersed by bats and birds that are relatively abundant in open vegetation, and because the species grows rapidly in secondary growth, the tree should be considered a good prospect for forest recovery in deforested areas (personal observations). However, *C. obtusifolia* has not been planted artificially and all the trees are regenerated naturally.