Alchornea latifolia Sw.

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EUPHORBIACEAE (SPURGE FAMILY)

No synonyms

Achiotillo, amargoso, envuelve cera, quesillo, sombra, tapatamal, ternera

Alchornea latifolia is found from southern Mexico to Panama and the West Indies, where it forms part of the middle stratum of high forests (Benitez and Montesinos 1988). In Honduras it is found in wet and semideciduous forests, in the departments of Cortes, Santa Barbara, Atlantida, Comayagua, Colon, and Olancho.

Alchornea latifolia is an evergreen, medium-sized tree, reaching 15 to 20 m in height and 60 cm in diameter. It has a liberally umbellated crown with dense and heavy foliage (Standley 1931). The interior bark is whitish and slightly bitter; the exterior bark is smooth or finely fissured and reddish brown with whitish spots. The branches are oblique and spread out fully, generally dropping down at the end (Little and Wadsworth 1964). The small branches are thin and cylindrical with numerous orange lenticels. The big, elliptic-oval leaves are arranged in spirals; they are simple, trinervate, with two to four base glands, and grouped at the end of the small branches. In Honduras the tree grows abundantly from sea level to elevations of 1500 m.

The leaf has a long petiole, 4 to 6 cm, cylindrical to elliptic, glabrous, with scattered hairs. It has an ovate or elliptic limb, rounded or briefly acuminate around the apex, 3 to 8 cm by 8 to 20 cm. It has an obtuse or slightly rounded base, more or less serrated around the edge, more or less pulpy, with young leaves becoming subcoriaceous later. The right side is shiny and dark green, and the back is light green. It has scattered stellate hairs on both sides and hairs around the axils of the nervation. The main vein is greatly prominent underneath; a pair of strong basal veins run toward the center of the leaf; and five to six pairs of secondary veins set deep on the right side are prominent on the back. Acrodrome secondary veins have extensions on the teeth (Jiménez 1997).

The wood of *A. latifolia* has a light-brown duramen and whitish alburnum, no characteristic odor or taste, straight hilum, medium texture, low shine, and soft streak. It is soft with a medium grain, is neither durable nor very resistant to attacks by fungi that cause rotting, and is very susceptible to attacks by termites. It dries at moderate speed in the open air, with no severe defects. It is moderately easy to preserve by the hot-cold method. Specific gravity is 0.39. Total radial shrinkage is 2.69 percent, intermediate 1.08 percent. Total tangential shrinkage is 8.51 percent, intermediate 4.96 percent, and volumetric shrinkage 8.8 percent. The tangential/radial shrinkage ratio is 3.160. The saturation point of the fiber is 24.50 percent. The wood is used in light construction, columns, beams, floors, frames, furniture, poles, fence posts, handicrafts, veneer, matches, boxes, crates, barrels, mesh floats, cores for veneer, and firewood (Benitez and Montesinos 1988).

The small, yellowish or greenish-white flowers are in axillary shoots approximately 5 to 15 cm long. The fruits are subglobulous capsules, 8 to 10 mm in diameter, with the style persisting at the apex, opening up in two valves. They are coffee-color when ripe. Each fruit contains two to three red, flattened seeds (Jiménez 1997).