

NYC Invasive Tree Field Guide: Identify and Act

Quick identification guide for Brooklyn, Queens, and Staten Island homeowners

1. Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*)

How to identify it:

- Compound leaves with 11 to 41 smooth-edged leaflets (no teeth)
- Crushed leaves smell like rancid peanut butter
- Grows FAST -- up to 6 feet per year in NYC lots and vacant spaces
- Samaras (winged seeds) hang in large clusters, reddish-brown
- Smooth grey bark; young twigs are velvety and reddish

Why it matters for your property:

Roots penetrate foundations, drainage systems, and sewer lines. Do NOT simply cut the stump -- it triggers aggressive resprouting. Removal requires a professional.

2. Norway Maple (*Acer platanoides*)

How to identify it:

- Star-shaped leaf with 5 to 7 pointed lobes -- looks like a sugar maple
- Break the leaf stem: milky white sap appears immediately (key test)
- Seeds (samaras) spread nearly horizontally (180 degrees apart)
- Dense shade canopy prevents undergrowth -- kills lawns beneath it
- Very common as a street tree in Brooklyn and Queens

Why it matters:

Shallow roots lift sidewalks and driveways. Dense canopy crowds out native plants. Classified as invasive by NY DEC.

3. Princess Tree (*Paulownia tomentosa*)

How to identify it:

- Very large heart-shaped leaves, sometimes up to 24 inches wide
- Showy purple tubular flowers in spring BEFORE leaves emerge
- Brown seed pods persist through winter (look like small brown eggs)
- Each tree produces 20 million seeds annually -- spreads aggressively
- Often seen on roadsides, vacant lots, disturbed urban sites in NYC

If You Have an Invasive Tree: What To Do

1. Confirm identification -- the milky sap test works for Norway maple; smell for tree of heaven

2. Do NOT cut and leave the stump -- tree of heaven will resprout aggressively from roots
3. Document the tree before any work (photos, measurements) for permitting records
4. Check if a NYC tree permit is needed -- even invasive trees near the street may require one
5. Contact Dragonetti for a professional assessment and removal plan

Need help identifying or removing an invasive tree? We serve all NYC boroughs.

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