

NORTHERN CATALPA

Catalpa speciosa (Warder)
Warder ex Englm.
Plant Symbol = CASP8

Contributed by: USDA NRCS Manhattan Plant
Materials Center and Kansas State University
Forestry Research



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Alternate Names

Hardy catalpa, western catalpa, Catawba, cigar tree,
Indian bean tree, Indian cigar

Uses

Northern catalpa is primarily used today as a large
ornamental shade tree. It is widely planted in urban
areas as a street and lawn tree. Conservation uses
include plantings in mined-land reclamation projects
and shelterbelts.

Status

Please consult the PLANTS Web site and your State
Department of Natural Resources for this plant's
current status (e.g. threatened or endangered species,
state noxious status, and wetland indicator values).

Weediness

This plant may become weedy or invasive in some
regions or habitats and may displace desirable
vegetation if not properly managed. Please consult
with your local NRCS Field Office, Cooperative
Extension Service office, or state natural resource or
agriculture department regarding its status and use.
Weed information is also available from the
PLANTS Web site at plants.usda.gov.

Description and Adaptation

A member of the Trumpet-creeper Family
(Bignoniaceae), northern catalpa is a perennial
deciduous tree which readily grows in USDA
Hardiness Zones 4 to 8. The height at 20 years is
about 20 feet. Catalpas prefer moist, deep, well
drained soil, but adapts to dry or wet soils. The soil
pH may range from 5.5 to 7.0. It prefers an open
sunny space to partial shade. It is tall with an
irregular, open-rounded to narrow-oval crown. This
tree comes into leaf very late in the spring and it is
one of the first to lose its leaves in the fall. Its
longevity is about 60 years.

The tree bark ranges from scaly to ridged, to blocky
plates. On young tree seedlings the bark is thin and
easily damaged by impact, or rodents.

Twigs in winter have a unique identifying
characteristic. They have sunken leaf scars which
resemble suction cups. Their whorled arrangement
of 3 scars per node is another trait easily identified.

Leaves are simple, large ovate to ovate-oblong, from
8 to 12 inches long, heart-shaped tropical looking
without any lobes and are yellowish green in color.
Leaves are generally opposite on large branches and
often whorled in 3 on young stems. They turn an
undistinguished yellow in the fall before dropping.

The flowers of catalpa are perfect. Flowering takes
place in late spring to early summer. They occur as
large clusters of showy, white, bell-shaped corollas of
5 lobes with ruffled edges and yellow, orange or
purple interior spotting or streaking. Individual
flowers are showy, tubular up to ½ inch broad. They

are branched in about 10 inch clusters at the stem tips. Seedpods are slender and green in the summer growing from 10 to 24 inches long, looking similar to an exaggerated green bean. They mature in the fall, turn dark brown, split open lengthwise to let seeds fall in the spring. The shape and color of the mature seedpod gives rise to the common name of cigar tree. It has been extensively propagated for over 200 years. It can now be found in most states east of the Rocky Mountains and in Utah.

Establishment

When placed as an ornamental in a yard setting, care must be taken to ensure it is not too close to a building, fence, property line or septic system. Ample space should be provided to let it reach a mature height.

Management

The biggest management problem with a catalpa tree used as an ornamental is litter. It will drop a heavy load of flowers in the spring, then a plentiful supply of leaves in the fall and finally a lot of large seedpods in the winter.

Pests and Potential Problems

Larva of the catalpa sphinx caterpillar (*Ceratonia catalpae*) eats leaves. Almost complete defoliation may occur in some years.

Immature seeds in the pods are often destroyed by a small yellow grub, the larva of a gnat.

Brown leaf spots on leaves are often created by the fungi *Macrosporium catalpae*. Catalpa is also susceptible to the decay fungus *Polystictus versicolor*. Powdery mildew causes a white powdery coating on the leaves. When severe the leaves turn yellow and drop. Verticillium wilt will make the branches die, and can eventually kill trees. Catalpa midge (*Cecidomyia catalpae* Comstock) causes leaf spots, injures terminal buds and branch tips, as well as seeds in the pods.

Environmental Concerns

It is an invasive, weedy tree which escapes cultivation easily. The flowers, long seedpods and seeds fall down from spring through winter, and create a mess on the ground anywhere near the tree.

Cultivars, Improved, and Selected Materials (and area of origin)

There are two species of catalpa native to North America, northern catalpa (*Catalpa speciosa*) and

southern catalpa (*Catalpa bignonioides*). They appear very similar but are two distinct species. One variety of *C. speciosa* has been documented: 'Pulverulenta' from Paul & Son.

Control

Please contact your local agricultural extension specialist or county weed specialist to learn what works best in your area and how to use it safely. Always read label and safety instructions for each control method. Trade names and control measures appear in this document only to provide specific information. USDA, NRCS does not guarantee or warranty the products and control methods named, and other products may be equally effective.

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For more information about this and other plants, please contact your local NRCS field office or Conservation District, and visit the PLANTS Web site <<http://plants.usda.gov>> or the Plant Materials Program Web site <<http://Plant-Materials.nrcs.usda.gov>>

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