

## 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.

### Key Web Sites

Extensive information about this species is linked to  
the Plants web site. To access this information, go to  
the Plants web site, select this plant, and utilize the  
links at the bottom of the Plants Profile for this  
species.

### 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 being planted 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](http://plants.usda.gov).

### Description and Adaptation

Trumpet-creeper Family (Bignoniaceae). It 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, are 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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