

Northern Catalpa

Published 6/11/19 – image of catalpa leaf, flowers, pod, & seed believed to come from Curtis's Botanical Magazine, date unknown

A few weeks ago I promised that one day we'd go into more detail about one of my favorite trees, the northern catalpa. This is that day as the catalpas are getting ready to flower, which is one of the reasons northern catalpas are one of my 3 favorite trees.

The native range of northern catalpas is thought to be from northeastern Arkansas up to southern Indiana near the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, although their prehistoric range may have been much wider. There are two species of catalpa, northern and southern, in the United States, ours being the northern. Other species of catalpas are native to China and several Caribbean islands. Northern catalpas are popular landscape trees and in the right areas grow wild so consequently can now be found in almost every state east of the Rocky Mountains. It's wood is soft, light, does not rot quickly, and has one of the lowest expansion-shrinkage rates of all US hardwoods. These characteristics make it a favored wood for fence posts, cabinetry, trim work, carving, and boat building.



Long seed pods that get up to about 18" long develop in the fall and stay on all winter creating an almost icicle appearance albeit brown which makes for admittedly weird icicles. Right now those pods are about to fall as flower buds for this year are developing and by the time this article is printed the first of the flowers may even be blooming. Both the pods and the very large flowers are other reasons I like this tree.

Catalpas are usually one of the later trees to leaf out in the spring, and this year with our cool and rainy weather that was especially evident. But catalpa leaves are worth the wait! On fully mature trees the largest leaves approach the size of dinner plates; even small catalpa leaves are usually larger than any other tree leaves. In hot, dry periods these large leaves will wilt when the tree becomes dry which makes a great indicator tree for watering. So when it's mid-summer during one of our area's famous hot spells and the catalpa's leaves start to wilt it's probably time to water all of your trees. Both the size of the leaves and being a reliable tree watering indicator add to my list of why these trees are one of my favorite.

The overall growth of the northern catalpas is very unique in that the tree's canopy width is about half it's height and the limbs have characteristic bends unlike any other tree found in our area. The trunks grow generally straight. Limbs tend to start out at an upwards angle from the trunk but usually bend almost like an elbow ending up almost straight vertical. The "elbowness" of the limbs helps the tree maintain it's narrow shape as it matures.

There are many places in town where mature catalpas are growing. One very nice specimen is on the east side of the street just uphill from the Harrison/Wells intersection. Once you see what it looks like when it's in full flower, others will be easy to spot around town.

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