

Learning about Southern Catalpa *Catalpa bignonioides* Walt.

Southern catalpa is a large ornamental shade tree that can grow from 25 - 40 feet tall and can live about 40 to 50 years. It is native to the United States. It is often planted to attract the catalpa worm, which are harvested and used as fish bait.

Characteristics. The leaves of the southern catalpa oak are deciduous, simple and opposite or whorled. They are 5 to 12 inches in length and 4 to 6 inches across and are heart shaped. They are medium green on the upper surface and paler and hairy on the bottom surface.

Fruit. Flowers appear from May through July. The flowers have five petals and are white with purple spots and orange stripes at the throat. The petals are about 1½ inches long. Seedpods are slender (½ inch wide) and green in color. They can grow from 6 to 24 inches long. They look like a long green bean. In the autumn, the seedpods turn brown and in the spring the pods split open and the seeds fall to the ground.

Geographic Range. The southern catalpa was first cultivated in 1726. It was originally found in Florida, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. It has since been planted in states east of the Rocky Mountains.

Additional Information.

- Southern Catalpa is often planted for the worm that feeds on the leaves of the plant. For this reason the tree is sometimes known as the “fisherman tree” or “fish bait tree.” The worm is the larva of the catalpa sphinx caterpillar (*Ceratomia catalpa*) which feeds on the leaves. This caterpillar has a tough skin and is particularly juicy, making it a great fishbait. It can be collected and frozen for use as fish bait at a later time.
- In some years this hungry visitor can eat almost all the leaves off the tree! While this is not a pretty sight, it does not damage the tree. The tree simply sprouts another growth of leaves.
- The southern catalpa has an extensive root system which makes it a good choice for erosion control.
- Green leaves give off a bad smell when crushed.
- Roots of the southern catalpa are highly poisonous.
- The bark was dried and ground into a powder and taken or brewed into a tea as a remedy for swollen lymph glands. The tea made from the leaves has also been used to treat snakebite and whooping cough and as a laxative.
- Because of the shape of the leaves, Native Americans used it to treat heart ailments.
- Catalpa can often escape deliberate plantings and can invade surrounding woodlands.
- The catalpa tree grows rapidly when it is young, but slows down as its crown begins to expand.
- Catalpa wood is strong and can be used for fence posts and furniture, however it is brittle so the trees can suffer ice and wind damage.



Pam Blanchard, LSU Coastal Roots



John H. Ghent, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org



Bruce Leander, Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Centre

References:

- Fowler, S. and Erikson, J. 2004. Southern Catalpa (*Catalpa Bignonioides*): Interesting Information About Plant.: <http://www.bellarmine.edu/faculty/drobinson/Catalpa.asp>
- Gilman, E.F., and Watson, D.G. 1993. *Catalpa spp.* U.S. Forest Service Department of Agriculture Southern Group, Fact Sheet ST-130. http://hort.ufl.edu/database/documents/pdf/tree_fact_sheets/catsppa.pdf
- USDA NRCS Plant Fact Sheet: Southern Catalpa, 2009. http://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_cabi8.pdf
- USDA NRCS Plant Guide: Southern Catalpa, 2010. http://plants.usda.gov/factsheet/pdf/fs_cabi8.pdf