

Catalpa spp.

Catalpas

kuh-TAL-pah
Catawba - Native American tribe
Bignoniaceae



Midwestern United States
Simple, Opposite
Deciduous, 40–80 ft.

Catalpas reached the peak of their popularity in California during the Victorian era, at the end of the nineteenth century, and have since been far less commonly planted. Their large, heart-shaped leaves that turn golden in the fall can create a lush, almost tropical appearance, even in the coldest parts of the state. Even though trees cannot run away to avoid being eaten by insects, they are amazing chemical factories with the ability to synthesize elaborate compounds from a few abundant ingredients (carbon dioxide, a little nitrogen, and some trace minerals). Among these thousands of compounds are poisons that discourage herbivores, whereas other trees make compounds that disrupt insect behavior. The large, white, crepe-like catalpa flowers are pollinated during the day by bumblebees and at night by large moths. The floral nectar contains a compound, catalposide, that does not affect these legitimate pollinators but will cause behavioral abnormalities, regurgitation, and paralysis in smaller, non-pollinating insects that try to steal the nectar. Catalposide is now being investigated as a potential medicinal compound for humans.



Trunk



Fruits

Seeds

All photos are
of *C. speciosa*

Acts of
creation are
ordinarily reserved for gods
and poets. To plant a tree,
one need only own a shovel.
—Aldo Leopold



Key to Commonly Cultivated Catalpas	
1.	Leaf unpleasant-smelling if crushed, tip shortly pointed, flowers <1.5 in. wide—Southern Catalpa (<i>C. bignonioides</i>)
1'	Leaf scentless, tip long-pointed, flowers >1.5 in. wide—Western Catalpa (<i>C. speciosa</i>)