



## Southern Catalpa (*Catalpa*)



This is a tree that demands your attention. White, showy flowers. Giant heart-shaped leaves. Dangling bean-like seed pods. Twisting trunk and branches. How could you not stop to take it in? And with all of these unique features, the southern catalpa is popular with kids as well.

While not ideal for every location, this unique and hardy tree is a fast grower that finds a home in parks and yards throughout the country.



## Hardiness Zones

The southern catalpa can be expected to grow in Hardiness Zones 5–9.

## Tree Type



## Mature Size

The southern catalpa grows to a height of 30–50' and a spread of 20–40' at maturity.



## Growth Rate

This tree grows at a medium to fast rate, with height increases of anywhere from 13" to more than 24" per year.



## Sun Preference

Full sun and partial shade are best for this tree, meaning it prefers a minimum of four hours of direct, unfiltered sunlight each day.



## Soil Preference

The southern catalpa grows in acidic, alkaline, loamy, moist, rich, sandy, silty loam, well-drained, wet and clay soils. A wide range of moisture conditions can be tolerated, including some flooding and extremely hot, dry conditions.



## Attributes

This tree:

- Can develop a unique twist in branches and the trunk.
- Can be expected to begin flowering about 7 years after planting.
- Produces clusters of large, trumpet-shaped white flowers in May and June that are showy and somewhat fragrant.
- Grows in an oval shape.
- Features distinctively large leaves that are up to 12" in length and 4–8" wide, with a somewhat heart or spear shape.
- Yields bean-like seed pods that are 8–20" long and  $\frac{1}{4}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide, starting out green and turning brownish as they ripen. They are filled with numerous, 1" long seeds that are fringed at the ends.
- Requires cleanup after the flower petals, leaves and seed pods drop.
- Should not be planted where fruit and flowers can drop on sidewalks, as they are slippery right after they fall.



## Wildlife Value

The flowers of the catalpa are visited by hummingbirds. It is the sole host of the catalpa sphinx moth. And it provides nutrition for bees in early summer.



## History/Lore

*Catalpa bignonioides* is a species of *Catalpa* that is native to the southeastern United States in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, and Mississippi. First cultivated in 1754, the wood was used for fence posts and railroad ties because of its resistance to rot and the tree's fast growth rate. Common names for this tree are many and colorful—including cigar tree, Indian bean tree, catawba, caterpillar tree, hardy catalpa, fisherman's tree, and western catalpa.

## Southern vs. Northern

There are two distinct species of catalpa in cultivation: the Northern catalpa (*Catalpa speciosa*, Zones 4–8) and the Southern catalpa (*Catalpa bignonioides*, Zones 5–9). The Northern catalpa has a taller trunk with vertically furrowed bark; the Southern catalpa is more squat and has bark that exfoliates in scales or flakes. The Southern catalpa has more flowers while in bloom, but they are slightly smaller than those of the Northern catalpa.



The catalpa tree is well-loved and recognized for its height, enormous heart-shaped leaves (up to 12 " long and 8" wide), twisted spreading branches, panicles of creamy white fragrant blossoms, and long dark brown seed pods. Though its tendency to spring up in odd places and grow rather quickly has earned it a reputation of being a bit of a "weed tree," plenty of folks love having this large, graceful shade trees on their properties. They became popular at the turn of the century in the Northeast US, and one often sees streets or cul-de-sacs named some variation "Catalpa Terrace" or "Catalpa Circle."

Also known as northern catalpa, hardy catalpa, western catalpa, southern catalpa, catawba, cigar tree and caterpillar tree, it is native to a wide-ranging area including North America, the Caribbean and East Asia. It's been cultivated throughout the US since the early 1800s. The flowers are attractive to bees, butterflies, and

hummingbirds for pollination, and this tree is the sole host for the catalpa sphinx moth. With dense foliage and large leaves, the catalpa provides excellent cover and shelter for a wide variety of songbirds and wildlife. The tree's hardiness once made it an important source of lumber, particularly for railroad ties and fence posts. It's seen in many large parks due to its hardiness and graceful shape in the landscape, but as an urban tree the leaf litter can be somewhat problematic near sidewalks and cars.

## Care of Catalpa Trees

The catalpa is remarkably adaptable to a wide range of soil, moisture, and weather conditions, and though it needs a good amount of sunlight, it's not fussy about its growing conditions.

### Light

The catalpa does best with at least four hours of direct sunlight per day. It prefers full sun to really thrive.

### Soil

The catalpa tolerates a wide range of soil conditions, from acidic to alkaline, wet clay soils, sandy, loam and more. Good drainage is always preferred but the catalpa can survive both flooding and extended periods of drought.

### Water

This tree tolerates drought as well as heavy rains and flooding and is not subject to problems from extremely wet or dry weather.

### Temperature and Humidity

Being native to warm, temperate zones, the catalpa has a somewhat narrow growing zone range of 4 to 8 (depending on species) but is a reliable deciduous tree that can tolerate cold winters and hot summers fairly consistently. It's not overly bothered by high humidity or dryness.



## Fertilizer

If your soil is fairly moist and rich, such as loam with good drainage, you won't need fertilizer for your catalpa. However, when planting in clay, silty or sandy soil, or in dry soils, you should consider applying a standard 10-10-10 fertilizer a few weeks after planting, to give it a good start and promote healthy growth.

## Types of Catalpa Tree

There are two main species of catalpa tree grown in North America, the northern catalpa and southern catalpa, both of which are fairly similar. The Chinese catalpa is a somewhat different species with yellow flowers, also known as yellow catalpa. All three are commonly planted outside their native areas as ornamental landscape trees.

- **Northern catalpa** (*Catalpa speciosa*) has somewhat larger seed pods, leaves and flowers than the southern catalpa.
- **Southern catalpa** (*Catalpa bignonioides*)
- **Chinese catalpa** (*Catalpa ovata*), also known as yellow catalpa
- **Haitian catalpa** (*Catalpa longissima*)

## Pruning

Catalpas should get regular pruning in youth to ensure good stable growth and good form. Start pruning at one year for new trees. Trim away suckers from the base, and trim large lower branches with a pruning saw to promote a straight, central "leader" trunk. As the catalpa grows, keep lower branches trimmed to allow for easier maintenance at the base of the tree. Pruning is best done in early spring after blooming or late fall.

## Propagation

Though they grow quickly, it takes about five to seven years for catalpas to reach maturity to the point where they blossom, and bear seed pods each year. Some varieties, such as the Haitian catalpa, begin producing flowers in the first two years of maturity. They can be grown from soft root cuttings or branch cuttings, or from seed. They also reseed freely in most areas where they are established.

## How to Grow Catalpa from Seed

Catalpa trees grow easily from seeds, which germinate fairly rapidly without any special treatment. The seeds (from the pods) should be sown in fairly warm temperatures between 60-70 degrees Fahrenheit and sowed on the surface of a light peaty soil mix, rather than covered in soil. You can collect the seeds in fall, keep refrigerated, then plant in spring and transplant the seedlings when they're 3-4 inches tall. Mist lightly with water and they will germinate within 14-30 days. You can direct sow the seed after last frost in spring, or in winter in a cold frame, sunny window or greenhouse.

## Common Problems with Catalpa Trees

The catalpa's seed pods appear in autumn. While beautiful on the tree and lending seasonal interest, these seed pods are fairly messy and may be slippery to pedestrians, so these trees should not be planted near sidewalks or parking lots. They can also be propagated from cuttings taken during the summer from non-flowering branches.

Although prone to pests, like the larva of catalpa sphinx moth, which can defoliate the tree, and some diseases, such as powdery mildew, leaf spot, and twig blight, catalpa trees are fairly resilient, weathering pests and diseases to grow well each year.

- Are catalpa trees easy to care for?

Apart from their tendency to produce a fair amount of "leaf litter" from their large leaves and seed pods, the catalpa tree is a fairly low-maintenance tree that is adaptable to a wide range of weather and soil conditions. They should be pruned regularly while young to promote strong branching structure.

- How fast do catalpa trees grow?

These trees have a medium to fast growth rate, and a mature catalpa usually grows between 12" and 24" inches in height per year.

- How long does a catalpa tree live?

Despite their rapid rate of growth, catalpa trees usually only live to be about 60 years old. Signs of deterioration include the branches becoming dry and brittle after leaves fall in autumn.













