

Conservation Corner

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*Shine on, O moon of summer,
Shine to the leaves of grass, catalpa and oak,
All silver under your rain to-night.*

Recently, while on an evening walk, I was drawn not to the silver moonlit leaves of Carl Sandburg's catalpas but to the heady aroma of the catalpa trees in our north windbreak. Blooming in all their glory, the catalpas soon came into full view, a welcome sight and this week's encounter with nature.

The Northern Catalpa is one of the Midwest's most unusual native trees – a shade, flowering, and ornamental tree all rolled into one. Shade, thanks to its 8 to 12-inch heart-shaped leaves, the largest simple leaves of any forest tree. Flowering, thanks to its heavy clusters of large, white, orchid-like flowers growing at the ends of its branches. Ornamental, thanks to its long, slender, green pods that turn brown in autumn, dangle on the tree all winter, and open in early spring to release their many silvery winged seeds.

Northern Catalpas come from a very narrow region

along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers from Indiana to Arkansas, but today may be found throughout the Midwest. Catalpa wood is gray in color and very durable, even when in contact with soil. So for over 200 years catalpas have been planted by farmers as a source of fence posts, including our three rows back in the 1940s, while catalpa plantations were planted by railroad companies as a source for RR ties that wouldn't rot. Farmers also planted catalpa groves to provide shade for hog lots. Even fishermen got in the act, planting catalpas to attract green catalpa worms, a prized fish bait.

The tree's scientific name, *Catalpa speciosa*, comes from the Cherokee word for the tree and the Latin word for showy. Perhaps you know catalpas by the common name cigar tree or Indian bean tree. Though catalpas are slow to leaf out each spring and don't bloom until mid-June, their showy flowers are an important nectar source for bees and hummingbirds.

Pioneer doctors used catalpa seeds and pods to treat asthma and other bronchial and heart problems, the juice of its leaves and roots to apply to swellings, and a tea from its bark for swollen lymph glands. Today pharmaceutical research has confirmed the diuretic properties of catalpas.

PCCB usually carries Northern Catalpa whips on our spring tree sale. Rated for zones 4-9, they have medium to fast growth rates and reach a mature height of 40-60 feet and span of 20-40 feet. Catalpas grow well in full sun or part shade and are tolerant of many soil types. They are a striking if somewhat messy landscape tree, a good windbreak and habitat tree for birds and wildlife, and a good tree to boost honey production.

Catalpas are fairly short-lived, however, with an average lifespan of 60 years. Several of our catalpas have toppled over and died of old age. While fencing recent windbreak additions, including two catalpa whips, Neil also included catalpa corner posts in crooked witness to grandpa's good intentions.