

Southern catalpa

(*Catalpa bignonioides*)

For definitions of botanical terms, visit en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glossary_of_botanical_terms.

The Southern catalpa is a strikingly beautiful tree with a fascinating cultural heritage. Also commonly referred to as the worm or fish bait tree, it is a larval host for the Catalpa sphinx moth (*Ceratomia catalpa*), whose caterpillars are tough and juicy, making them ideal fish bait! They were often planted specifically for this reason. The voracious caterpillars can defoliate a tree once or even twice a year, with no apparent negative impact. New leaves typically emerge within a month of defoliation.



Photo by Betsy Harris

This 25- to 40-foot tree bears short crooked branches that form a somewhat irregular-shaped crown. Large heart-shaped and prominently veined leaves are 6 to 12 inches long and about half as wide with a petiole almost equally as long. They are oppositely arranged and deciduous. Flowers are formed in clusters of 10 to 20, with each blossom on a short stem. Individual flowers average 2 inches across and are two-lipped, united at the base. They open into 5 bright white ruffled petal-like lobes. The throat is adorned with large yellow spots and smaller dark purple spots and stripes. The seed pods can reach up to 18 inches long, ripening into a dark brown color and providing yet another common name — Cigar tree.

The genus name *Catalpa* is a Muskogean word for “tree.” The species epithet *bignonioides* refers to the related Crossvine (*Bignonia capreolata*), which has similarly shaped flowers.

Family: Bignoniaceae (Bignonia family)

Native range: Throughout Panhandle and scattered peninsular counties south to Hillsborough and Polk

To see where natural populations of Southern catalpa have been vouchered, visit www.florida.plantatlas.usf.edu.

Hardiness: Zone 8A–9B

Lifespan: Perennial

Soil: Moist loam

Exposure: Full to part sun

Growth habit: Up to 70 feet tall, 35 feet wide

Propagation: Seed, cuttings

Garden Tips: Southern catalpa can make a very showy statement or shade tree and is highly adaptable in moist to dry conditions. However, maintenance should be considered before adding to a landscape. The plant drops flower and seed pod litter as well as large leaves that can have a foul odor when crushed. It also forms root suckers.

Southern catalpas are occasionally available from nurseries that specialize in Florida native plants. Visit www.PlantRealFlorida.org to find a nursery in your area.



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