38. Catalpa bignonioides Walter
Southern Catalpa

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The largest known Southern Catalpa tree in Michigan occurs north of Grand Rapids in the city of Sparta, in Kent County in the southwest part of Michigan’s Lower Peninsula.

Description of the Species: Catalpas belong to the family Bignoniaceae. As such they have showy white flowers which are borne in many-flowered panicles. The flowers are 2–6 cm across and are 5-lobed at their 2-lipped tips and tubular below (Fig. 1). From a distance they could be confused with the similar sized panicles and flowers of the Horse Chestnut tree which, however, is readily distinguished by its palmately compound leaves. The leaves of the catalpas are simple, opposite or whorled, large, heart-shaped, and have an acuminate apex. The leaves of the Southern Catalpa are smaller (10–20 cm) than those of the Northern Catalpa (20–30 cm). The flowers of the Southern Catalpa are also smaller (2–4 cm across) than those of the Northern Catalpa (4–6 cm across). The cylindrical fruiting capsules of the Southern Catalpa are about 1 cm in diameter. Those of the Northern Catalpa are larger, usually 1.5 cm in diameter. Both species retain their capsules throughout the winter. The seeds of the Southern Catalpa have pointed fringed wings at both ends. Those of the Northern Catalpa have wide fringed wings at both ends.

In southern Michigan, the Northern Catalpa is a common native species and the Southern Catalpa is quite rare as a cultivated species.

Location of Michigan’s Big Tree: The largest known Southern Catalpa in Michigan is located behind the house at 101 Division St. in Sparta, MI. The tree can be reached by taking US Route 131 north through Grand Rapids. Continue north to exit 89 and take Michigan Route 37 (M-37) towards Newago. Turn right onto 13 Mile Road which becomes Division Street in Sparta. At 101 West Division Street, behind a yellow house, is the champion Southern Catalpa tree. The GPS coordinates for this location are N 43° 9.681′ by W 85° 42.757′. Thanks to Fred Nietering for help in locating this tree.

Description of Michigan’s Big Tree: The tree has a large brass plaque dated April 13, 1960 declaring that “This tree is a champ.” The plaque was placed there by the Michigan Botanical Club. There is a large hollow place in the trunk. As measured on 5 June 2003, the girth was 195″ (16′ 3″, diameter = 62″). The tree was 72′ (22 m) high and had an average crown spread of 62′ (18.9 m). The total points for this tree are 195 + 72 + 1⁄4 (62) = 283.
INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

If you would like to join in extending this series of articles by visiting and describing one or more of Michigan’s Big Trees please contact Elwood B. Ehrle for help with locations, specifications for taking measurements, and assistance with the manuscript. The Michigan Botanical Club encourages your involvement in this activity. Please remember to ask permission before entering private property. For the most recent list of Michigan’s Big Trees see Ehrle (2003).

Figure 1. Characteristics of the Southern Catalpa and location of Michigan’s Big Tree. The illustrations are from Barnes and Wagner (1981). The asterisk on the map shows the location of Michigan’s Big Tree. 1. Winter twig, ×1. 2. Leaf, ×⅛. 3. Panicle of flowers, ×⅙. 4. Fruit, capsule, ×⅛. Seed, ×1.
LITERATURE CITED

REVIEW

As a graduate student at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, 1960-1964, I wanted to learn something of the Tennessee flora. There were precious few resources, I soon learned. We mostly used out-of-range manuals like the Britton & Brown Illustrated Flora and Gray’s Manual, and they sufficed. I asked my professors about books on the Tennessee flora, and they acknowledged that some kind of typed checklist existed but otherwise there wasn’t much. Gattinger’s 1901 “The flora of Tennessee and a Philosophy of Botany . . .” was a historical oddity, which I never saw—it may well have been in the library, but I never bothered to look. In any case, floristic work was not encouraged, and we graduate students were more strongly encouraged to get on with our dissertation work, which mostly took the form of generic monographs.

There now exists a printed checklist of the Tennessee flora: Wofford & Kral, 1993, Sida Botanical Miscellany No. 10. And now, at long last, a truly scholarly work on an obvious segment of the flora of the state appears. It is not a large segment, comprising only 14.3% of the vascular plants, according to the Introduction.

Tennessee is not exactly within the purview of The Michigan Botanist, a journal of Great Lakes botany. Nonetheless, the book deserves attention here because it is such a fine model of how a botanical guide should be written. Moreover, the book appears to have been overlooked by reviewers, and that’s a pity.

The Introduction is a generous 21 pages in length. Everything is explained and defined. (This is followed by an ample glossary, too.) The floristic provinces of the state are dealt with at length, and there’s an outline map of the 95 counties of the state. As explained in the introduction, the illustrations cover nearly all the species and are mostly color photographs of flattened specimens, prior to drying. This is an innovation in botanical illustration, to my knowledge, and worthy of being copied by other authors.