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Northern catalpa *(Catalpa speciosa)*
Nebraska Forest Service

Northern catalpa is a tree that is not usually planted as a landscape specimen and it is often overlooked for rural plantings as well. But the tree does have some excellent qualities that should not be overlooked.

Northern catalpa *(Catalpa speciosa)* is native to a relatively small area of the central Mississippi Valley basin from southern Illinois down into Missouri and Arkansas. The range of the plant has greatly increased through planting on farms as fence post material and as an ornamental. The wood is very resistant to decay and it is much lighter in weight than black locust or osage-orange.

The name catalpa is said to come from a Cherokee Indian word that means bean tree. The seed pods look like large string beans. Speciosa is from the Latin meaning species. Catalpa is sometimes called cigar tree, also referring to the long seed pods that are visible from mid-summer and into fall. The tree is relatively large and may reach heights of 70 feet under ideal conditions. The National champion is located in Walla Walla, Washington and has a circumference of 22 feet and is 79 feet tall.

Northern catalpa provides a nice show of color in late spring since it flowers after most all other trees have finished flowering. The flowers are short lived and when they fall they cover the ground like snow. The leaves are large and heart-shaped. Catalpa can be troublesome since the larger leaves and seed pods can be messy. The pods open up in the fall and a winged seed will fall out. The tree does not grow easily from seed. The fall color is yellow.

One side benefit that catalpa can provide in some areas is that it is a frequent target of the catalpa sphinx. The larval stage of this insect feeds on catalpa leaves and this caterpillar is prized as fish bait.

Catalpa is a member of the Bignonia family and is related to trumpet vine and royal paulownia.

Catalpa will grow on a variety of sites but prefers a rich soil. The tree does not tolerate being planted in shade. Select a larger open site. It is a relatively fast grower but it is often hard to find in the nursery industry. Planted in groups or as a single specimen, catalpa is an impressive tree.