

Wood of The Month



Poplar – *Liriodendron tulipifera*

As a woodturner, you are undoubtedly familiar with Poplar. Also known as Yellow Poplar, Tulip Poplar, Tulip tree, and White-poplar among others. Poplar, as we know it, is not a “true” poplar which is of the *populus* genus and includes the cottonwoods, aspens and balsam poplars, but is of the *Liriodendron* genus which means “lily tree” and the flowers look similar to tulips, hence the common name: Tulip Poplar. Yellow Poplar is actually in the Magnolia family.

The Tulip Poplar tree is a very tall stately tree which grows 100 to 150 feet in height with trunk diameters of 8 to 10 feet. The straight trunk is free of limbs for about 40 to 50 feet and occasionally up to 80 to 90 feet. Therefore, that is why the lumber is fairly knot free and can be purchased in large sizes. Poplar is the state tree of Indiana, Kentucky, and Tennessee. The nectar from the flowers produces a dark reddish honey. The sapwood is off-white to grayish white, while the heartwood is variable in color, ranging from clear yellow to tan, greenish brown or olive-brown, and is frequently marked with shades of purple, dark green, blue and black. The multiple colored version is sometimes referred to as Rainbow Poplar. The wood is usually straight-grained, is moderately light, not strong, but easy to machine and work. It glues well, does not nail well, but takes and holds paint exceptionally well and can be stained or dyed to attractive colors.

The wood has been used for almost every conceivable purpose, limited only by sufficient strength for some items. It is used for furniture (mostly as the secondary wood or structural wood for upholstered furniture), interior trim and moulding, boxes and crates, pallets, caskets, musical instruments, toys, woodenware, paper and veneer for berry boxes and plywood. It is outstanding as an all-purpose wood for the home workshop and a turner’s friend for making fixtures and devices for woodturning. Therefore, it is a utility wood in nearly every sense. It is even a good wood to practice on. It is advisable to use dust collection when sanding as it does create fine sanding dust.

Tulip tree has been cultivated since 1663. It is an important ornamental tree for lawns, parks, and cemeteries and one of the most attractive and tallest of eastern hardwoods. Fast growing, trees may reach 300 years of age. Early lumberman called it “poplar” for its lightweight wood similar to poplars and birches. Daniel Boone utilized a tulip tree to build a 60-foot long canoe to carry his family and gear down the Ohio River from Kentucky into Spanish territory. The Native Americans used bark tea for indigestion, dysentery, rheumatism, pin-worms, fevers,

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and in cough syrups; used externally, as a wash on fractured limbs, wounds, boils, and snakebites. In medicine, an alkaloid extract from the bark was once used as a heart stimulant.

You can read more about Poplar at; [Poplar on Wikipedia](#) and on [The Wood Database](#).

Written by – Mel Bryan