

Wood of The Month



Catalpa – *Catalpa speciosa*

Catalpa, *Northern Catalpa*, (*Catalpa speciosa*) is a somewhat underrated hardwood, not often found in lumber form. There are a total of eleven *Catalpa* species worldwide, with only two species – Northern catalpa and Southern catalpa (*C. speciosa* and *C. bignonioides*, respectively) – native to North America.

The catalpa tree is a medium to large, deciduous tree that typically grows to 40-70' (less frequently to 100') tall with an irregular, open-rounded to narrow-oval crown. Broad ovate to ovate-oblong leaves (to 12" long) are pointed at the tips and rounded to cordate at the bases. Leaves are light green to yellow green above and densely pubescent below. Foliage turns an undistinguished yellow in the fall. Flowers can be a real showstopper, however. Bell-shaped, orchid-like white flowers (to 2" long) with purple and yellow inner spotting appear in panicles in late spring and can be quite fragrant. Flowers give way to long slender green seedpods (12-22" long). Seedpods give rise to the common name of cigar tree, although they actually are longer and thinner than most cigars. The catalpa gets its name from the Catawba Indian tribe's name for the tree (the tribe itself is also named after the tree).

The heartwood ranges from a neutral grayish tan to a richer golden brown; nearly the entire trunk is composed of heartwood. The narrow sapwood is pale gray. Overall appearance resembles ash. Grain is straight; open, coarse texture. Growth rings are distinct (ring-porous cell structure), generally wide; individual rings often variable in width. The wood is moderately light weight, soft and weak in bending, but is durable. It finishes well if the large pores are filled. It is generally easy to work, though care must be taken during sanding to avoid creating indents and ridges where the softer latewood areas tend to sand more readily than the earlywood portions. It turns and carves well and is favored by carvers just as basswood or butternut, however it is suited to outdoor carvings over either.

Tea from the bark formerly was used as an antiseptic, snakebite antidote, laxative, sedative, and internal worm expellant. Tea from the seeds was used for asthma, bronchitis, and applied externally for wounds.

You can read more about *catalpa* at: [Wikipedia](#) and on [The Wood Database](#).

Written by – Mel Bryan