



SOUTHERN CATALPA

Catalpa bignonioides

Southern catalpa (*Catalpa bignonioides*) is a deciduous, hardwood tree native to the southeastern United States. It has heart-shaped leaves and long panicles of maroon and white flowers. We also call them “Catawba” trees substituting the “l” and “p” with a “w” and “b” in the way that we southerners slow down an uppity three-syllable word. One group of admirers appreciate catalpas for reasons other than aesthetic. In fact, they enjoy them most when infested with a parasite and nearly defoliated. Resourceful fishermen have long sought the parasites in the form of caterpillars as fish bait supreme. Indeed, many a whiskered catfish has been wrestled over the side of a cypress johnboat after falling victim to a 2/0 hook garnished with a catalpa worm. We do call them worms, but they are actually caterpillars of the catalpa sphinx moth. Their life cycle begins as eggs attached to the bottom of catalpa leaves in the spring. The eggs hatch into caterpillars that voraciously eat the leaves, often leaving the tree in a near naked state. If the caterpillars manage to avoid predators, such as wasps, cuckoos and fishermen, they enter the ground under the tree and pupate into adult catalpa sphinx moths. The plain, brown moths emerge and lay eggs on the tree to complete the cycle. Several generations occur in one summer, and the last one over-winters in the ground until the following spring. So, opinions concerning catalpa trees are not unlike politics. It’s a matter of perspective. One either votes for them as handsome ornamentals or as sources of fish bait. You can’t have your shade tree and eat your blackened catfish too. (adapted from Bayou-Diversity (Kelby Ouchley); LSU Press)



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