Naturalist's Notebook

Read More Stories

Hail to the Poplar

| August 1, 2007 | No Comments

images/voice_uploads/sahriDeangelo_circle.gif">

In 1807 Thomas Jefferson planted a tulip poplar near the west entrance of his home. Over the course of two centuries, this tree and another nearby have grown to massive proportions, perfectly framing his impressive house.
Almost twenty years ago on a visit to Monticello, I purchased a 12-inch tulip poplar seedling at the site's gift shop, and drove home to North Carolina with the fragile plant in its tiny plastic pot carefully propped between coolers and luggage on the car's floorboard. That seedling was the offspring of the poplars planted by Jefferson.
In a similar manner Mt. Vernon today is enhanced by two poplars that George Washington planted along its serpentine drive. The fact that two of the most famous presidents and Founding Fathers chose the tulip poplar for prominent locations on their estates is, perhaps, more than a coincidence. "Stately," "regal," and "ceremonial" all seem appropriate adjectives for this species. Its straight, dominant trunk evokes images of classical Greek columns on

monumental government buildings (though the original Greek column design itself was probably inspired by trees).

Tree House

The immensity of tulip poplars is legendary. Colonial explorer John Lawson wrote of a tale he'd heard regarding a large man who temporarily dwelled inside a hollow poplar, with "his bed and household furniture" until he was able to build a more conventional house. Lawson thought it important to add that "he afterwards became a noted man for wealth and conduct," curiously implying that the man's experience inside the poplar had something to do with his later riches and esteem.

Though the scarcity of affordable housing today has not yet driven people to dwell inside poplars, many poplar products can be found inside and around modern dwellings. Poplar bark house siding has become fashionable in recent years, though this construction method is actually very old, going back to pre-Columbian Indians. The wood has the ideal characteristics of being both lightweight and durable, resulting in its use in a wide variety of products such as furniture, musical instruments, crates, and paneling. The poplar's bright orange and white blooms exude a prodigious amount of nectar; so much that the flowers occasionally overflow, dripping nectar like rain. The quantity of nectar is among the highest of any tree or plant in North America. Though dark in color, its honey is tasty and produced reliably every spring.

The tulip poplar (Liriodendron tulipifera) is found throughout the eastern United States. The common name can be confusing, especially to northerners who call it the "tuliptree" and associate poplars with other species such as aspens. The tulip poplar actually is related to magnolias, but acquired the name "poplar" because it vaguely resembles true poplars with its pendulous leaves that quiver like a quaking aspen. With true poplars being uncommon in the South, southerners

have had no need to differentiate between the two and retained the common name of poplar. “Tulip” refers to the leaves’ resemblance of a tulip silhouette.

A Graceful Giant

Indians found the tree’s straight trunk and lightweight wood ideal for dugout canoes. Pioneers including Daniel Boone adopted this practice as a means of transportation as well. Native Americans processed the inner bark into a type of rope and formed the outer bark into handy buckets. Another bark-derived material is a drug called tulipiferine, used to treat heart conditions.

A soaring poplar focuses our attention on a vertical dimension the same way a spreading oak draws our eyes horizontally. It is the tallest hardwood in North America. For all the enormity and magnificence of the species, though, the tree has an exceptional gracefulness about it. Donald Culross Peatie accurately captures this characteristic, “despite the splendor of its dimensions, there is nothing overwhelming about the Tuliptree, but rather something joyous in its springing straightness, in the candle-like blaze of its sunlit flowers; it’s leaves are forever turning and rustling in the slightest breeze; this gives the tree an air of liveliness lightening its grandeur.”

The knee-high Monticello poplar I transplanted seventeen years ago on the Blue Ridge crest is now at least twenty feet tall and thriving, having survived fierce winds, gnawing deer, and the construction of a huge groundhog hole beneath it.

We live in a world of perceived scarcity, where value is determined by rarity. We often fail to recognize that Creation usually provides in abundance. The notion of purchasing a Jefferson-owned antique from Monticello as a souvenir is ludicrous. Even if any were for sale, the price would be exorbitant. Yet that tulip poplar- from Jefferson’s own tree- cost less than ten dollars and is only one of potentially thousands that could be produced every year.

Like this content? Sign up for our Voice emails

Categories: 2007 - Issue 4 (August) | Naturalists Notebook | The Appalachian Voice

Sorry, the browser you are using is not currently supported. Disqus actively supports the following browsers:

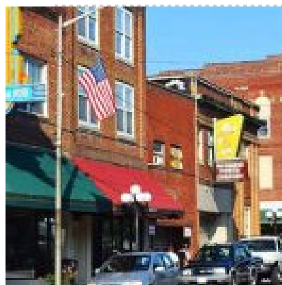
- Firefox
- Chrome
- Internet Explorer 11+
- Safari

VIEW THIS ISSUE

2007 - Issue 4 (August)

Related Stories

Good and bad bills in NC legislature



White House releases report on transitioning coal communities

Energy Storage and Electrification Project Manager

New Virginia law sets up stakeholder process to diversify coal region's economy

Director of Finance and Operations

Regular

Columns

Hiking the Highlands

Hail to the Poplar

Across Appalachia

Energy Report

Inside Appalachian Voices

Member Spotlight: Russ Moxley

Volunteer monitors coal mine data and maintains Appalachian Trail

Creating Positive Change: A Note from Our Executive Director

Solar, Environmental Justice and Utility Reform in Virginia

From the Appalachian Voices Front Porch Blog

Good and bad bills in NC legislature

FERC setting up an "Office of Public Participation." After 40 years.

Tighter silica rules needed to protect miners from black lung disease

The Appalachian Voice is a publication of Appalachian Voices
589 West King Street, Boone, N.C.
© 2021 Appalachian Voices

About Appalachian Voices
Program Work
Front Porch Blog
Press room
Contact
Privacy Policy