

Kentucky Champion Tree Program

Kentucky's Stately Tree: Yellow-Poplar

by Diana Olszowy

Tree photo left and below courtesy:
Diana Olszowy

Photo courtesy:
Kentucky Division of Forestry

It is not uncommon for native trees to have aliases that vary from state to state, and even from one end of the state to the other. Kentucky's state tree is referred to as the tuliptree, tulip poplar, whitewood, fiddletree and, to the forestry community, yellow-poplar. All these nicknames can be confusing, as the tree is not a true poplar but part of the magnolia family and one of the most "stately" trees in Kentucky's forests. The yellow-poplar is a tree that, with little effort, grows 70-90 feet high and averages 48-72 inches in circumference. Located on Daniel Boone National Forest property in McCreary County, Kentucky's magnificent champion yellow-poplar measures more than 18 feet in circumference and a whopping 163 feet tall, making it the tallest of Kentucky's champions. Yellow-poplar is native throughout the state, and its natural range extends from Texas to Florida, north to New England, and west to Ontario, Canada.

In Eastern Kentucky, specifically in the Appalachian Mountains, yellow-poplar is one of the dominant species. Its fast, straight growth pattern, often with no limbs until 80-100 feet in height, makes it a valuable timber tree. Yellow-poplar grows best in moist but well-drained soils and is often found in pure stands or will grow with white oak, black walnut, hickory, basswood, and black cherry. Two features of yellow-poplar give it the nickname of "tuliptree," one being the characteristic four-lobed leaf resembling the tulip's silhouette and the other being the large, showy, tulip-shaped flowers. The unusual fruit (cone-like aggregate of samaras), which remains on the tree during the winter, make it an easy tree to identify.

The wood is used for furniture, plywood, structural framing, interior trim, and in the south, pulpwood. Early settlers used the wood extensively in building and made home remedies from the inner bark of the roots while the Native Americans made their dugout canoes out of the trunks. The flowers provide a significant amount of nectar, making them a popular bee tree. It is commonly recommended as a shade tree; its tall and rapid growth is a function of its shade intolerance. If planted in full sun, the species tends to grow shorter and rounder making it adaptable to landscape planting where it provides good shade and is attractive in all seasons.

Whether you call this species tuliptree, tulip poplar or yellow-poplar, it is still one of Kentucky's most "stately" trees.

Photo courtesy: Frank Bonner, USFS (ret.), Bugwood.org

This champion tree is not the easiest one to take photos of because it is approximately 150 feet down a cliff in a gorge that is surrounded by downed trees and large boulders.

Kentucky's state tree, the yellow-poplar, is readily recognized by its large flowers in the spring and the residual fruit that remains after leaf fall. In addition to being the state tree of Kentucky the yellow-poplar is also the state tree of Indiana and Tennessee.



Photo courtesy: Karen A. Rawlins,
University of Georgia, Bugwood.org



Kentucky's state champion yellow-poplar is the tallest of all state champion trees at a 163 feet.

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