
Wildflower Spot – January 2010

John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

TULIP TREE

Liriodendron tulipifera

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

Tulip tree is easily recognized in the summer by its unusual square-shaped leaves with four shallow lobes. Striking in the spring are the beautiful yellow-green, tulip-like flowers, each petal-base with an orange blotch. The outline of the leaf is also somewhat tulip-like. Coneshaped groups of fruits (samaras) are produced in the fall.

In winter the stout, lustrous twigs have a spicy aromatic odor and are tipped with peculiar duck-bill-shaped buds, with a line (stipule) underneath running all the way around the twig. The scars left by the fallen leaves are roundish and somewhat elevated with several dots (bundle scars) in the center arranged in a circle -- these remain from the tubes carrying water and food to and from the leaf. This tree is very straight and tall with dark gray bark, often whitened in grooves.

No other common broad-leaved tree in our area grows a straight and slightly tapering trunk, clear of branches for a great distance from the ground. Tulip tree is one of the largest



and finest of eastern American hardwoods, commonly reaching 80-100 feet with a 2-5 foot trunk diameter. While preferring moist, well-drained soils and rich woods, it makes a very desirable street, shade, or ornamental tree. Tulip tree ranges throughout eastern U.S. to the Mississippi River, and in every county in Virginia. It was introduced into Europe from Virginia by the earliest colonists and grown also on the Pacific Coast.

Tulip-tree wood is used for furniture, musical instruments, boats, interiors. While sold commercially as “yellow poplar,” it is a member of the magnolia family. Indians and pioneers made trunks into dugout canoes. Bees make quantities of honey from the flowers, and the seeds are eaten by squirrels and songbirds. ❖

Photo: Tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*) taken by Helen Hamilton
For more information about native plants visit www.vnps.org.