

VanDusen Botanical Garden  
5251 Oak Street  
Vancouver, BC V6M 4H1

TREE OF THE MONTH: *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea'  
July 2010

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**To locate this tree, please refer to the map on the other side of this sheet. Look for a black sign near the tree labelled “Tree of the Month”.**

On August 30, 1975, the Opening Day of VanDusen Botanical Garden, this young golden-leaved Indian bean tree or *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea' was planted near the formal Rose Garden by Mr. VanDusen, Premier Dave Barrett and Mayor Art Phillips. Now, 35 years later it has developed a typically short thick trunk and a broad crown consisting of long irregular branches.

“Catalpa” evolved from the Cherokee's name for the tree, “kutuhlpa”. “Bignonioides” commemorates Louis IV's librarian, the Abbe Bignon. “Catalpa” was actually a transcription error made from the vernacular name “catawba” by the botanist Scopoli, who was the first to write a formal description of the tree. Common names today for it are the “Cigar tree” and the “Fish Bait tree”. The former because of the shape of its long seed pods, which were erroneously thought to have been smoked by native inhabitants, and the second for the catawba worms or caterpillars of the catalpa sphinx moth, which feed voraciously on the leaves and are used by fishermen as bait. Some avid anglers apparently grow *Catalpas* just so that they can have their own supply of catawba worms! *Catalpas* are also a bit of a phoenix among plants, because even though these caterpillars can denude *Catalpas* several times, each time the trees renew their foliage within a week. However, severe and constant defoliation can kill the trees over time.

*Catalpas* belong to the Bignonia plant family or trumpet-vine family which also includes the South American jacaranda. There are Asian as well as American *Catalpas*. And there are Asian and American hybridized *Catalpas*. In the US there are northern and southern *Catalpas*. The northern *Catalpa speciosa* is hardier and has larger leaves, fewer flowers and broader seed pods. It is native to the mid-western US. The southern *Catalpa bignonioides* is native to the natural levees, banks and large river flood plains of the south-eastern United States. Nowadays it is among the best loved shade tree in cultivation. Although fossil records show that this tree existed in Europe sometime between 65 to 1.8 million years ago, it wasn't until the 1720s that *Catalpa* seeds were grown again in Britain, thanks to Mark Catesby, an Englishman, who introduced the first wild specimens to gardeners in England and America.

How wonderful that we can enjoy this *Catalpa bignonioides* 'Aurea' here, with its large, graceful lime-yellow heart-shaped leaves, which arrive rather later than most, fooling visitors into thinking the tree is dead! But then, in late June or early July, when those panicles of hundreds of thousands of white, showy trumpet-shaped flowers with their internal pattern of small purple dots and fine purple brush-strokes radiating outwards around two orange smudges at their throats appear, we know that the wait has been worthwhile. The flowers blend with the golden leaves to create a bouquet-like effect concealing some fascinating adaptations. Even the leaves are able to secrete nectar. And the flowers are constructed so that self-fertilization is unlikely. The stigmas stay closed until the anthers have opened and released their pollen and withered. Not just a pretty face, this tree!

If you revisit the Garden in the fall, look for long, thin, fruits which hang from branch tips like slender black pea-pods that crack open to release white, winged seeds. Many of these seed cases remain stalwartly attached to the branches during the winter months like dark icicles. They can often linger right up until the new spring growth appears.

Now enjoy your walk through the rest of the Garden and keep your eyes open for other wonderful *Catalpas* here and throughout the city.