

## Tree of the Month, June 2014: Tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*)

Tulip trees are easy to recognize because of their distinctive bright green, 4-lobed leaves. They look a bit like a maple leaf with the tip snipped off. The flowers resemble yellow-green tulips with an orange stripe across the base of each petal. *Liriodendron tulipifera* means “tulip-bearing lily-tree”. Tulip trees have tall, straight trunks and high branches, which makes it hard to see the flowers that only bloom way up in the canopy. The tree doesn't produce flowers until it's about 15 years old. The seeds develop on a cone-shaped receptacle, and each seed has a long, skinny wing, so they spiral to the ground when they are mature, like the samaras of a maple tree. The leaves turn a beautiful golden-yellow in autumn.

*Liriodendron tulipifera* is native to Southeastern Canada and the Eastern United States. They can grow to heights of 50 m, and their tall, branchless trunks make good timber. The creamy white wood was used by First Nations to make dugout canoes. Tulip trees tolerate air pollution quite well, and are sometimes used as street trees, especially the upright cultivar 'Fastigiata'. They are often infested with aphids, tiny insects that drink sap and exude sweet honeydew, so watch out if you park your car under a tulip tree – you may have a sticky windshield to clean.

There are two species of *Liriodendron* - *L. tulipifera* and *L. chinense*, which is native to China and Vietnam. *Liriodendron* belongs to the Magnolia Family, Magnoliaceae, in a subfamily called Liriodendroideae (although some botanists think they are different enough from magnolias to be in their own family). Like magnolias, tulip trees have simple flowers that many botanists think resemble those of the first flowering plants. In Kansas in the 1970s, fossils of a tulip tree ancestor named *Archaeanthus* (Latin for “first flower”) were found dating back to the mid-Cretaceous, 100 million years ago. The fossils show us how the tulip tree's leaf shape evolved over time from two lobes to four.

The tulip tree was likely introduced into European cultivation by John Tradescant, an English botanist who visited the American colony of Virginia in the mid-1600s. It was thought to be unique until *Liriodendron chinense*, was discovered in China by plant collector Ernest Wilson. He sent samples back to England in 1901. The Chinese tulip tree has plain green flowers and more deeply lobed leaves than the American tulip tree, and is becoming rare in the wild due to heavy logging.