

## **Tree of the Month, June 2015:** Butternut (*Juglans cinerea*)

*Juglans cinerea*, known as butternut or white walnut, is a deciduous tree native to Eastern North America. It is similar in appearance to black walnut (*Juglans nigra*), with both having pinnate (feather-like, divided) leaves and gray furrowed bark. However, the leaves of butternut have a single terminal leaflet, and much paler bark (*cinerea* comes from the Latin word *cineris*, meaning dust or ashes - a reference to the light-gray bark).

Butternut usually lives for only 75 years or so, and can grow over 20 meters tall. Like other walnuts, its roots release a toxin called juglone into the soil to kill off competing plants. This action is called allelopathy, where one organism releases chemicals to affect the growth of another organism. Some plants are immune to the toxin, such as Solomon's seal (*Polygonatum biflorum*) which grows abundantly at the base of the butternut at VanDusen.

Walnuts are monoecious, with both male and female flowers on the same tree. Butternut has long green male catkins that are visible in late spring, and tiny female flowers that bloom in summer. The delicious nut, used to make maple-butternut candy in New England, is encased in a fuzzy, green, egg-shaped husk. The husks are rich in juglone, which can be used to dye fabric a fade-resistant light brown – it will also stain your skin, so you may want to wear gloves if you are planning to husk fresh butternuts. The husks have also been used by aboriginal peoples to make drinks to purge intestinal worms and other parasites.

*Juglans cinerea* is endangered in Quebec, Ontario and New Brunswick, and threatened in several American states. This decline is due to logging, development and a fungal disease known as butternut canker that arrived from Asia in the 1960s.