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Technical Report



Wetland Flora

No. 00-3 / March 2000

Gene Silberhorn

Tulip Poplar Tulip Tree

Liriodendron tulipifera L.

Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Tulip poplar is a tall, up to 100 feet, deciduous tree with alternate, lobed leaves with large, solitary, tulip-like flowers. This relatively fast growing tree typically has tall straight trunks with very few lower branches. Leaves and flowers are very distinctive. The leaves are predominately four lobed (rarely six lobed), dark green on the upper side and pale green underneath. The flowers are characteristically magnolia-like, which is not surprising because the tree belongs to the magnolia family (Magnoliaceae). Unlike most native magnolias (*Magnolia*), known for their white or cream colored flowers, *Liriodendron* petals are yellow/green with curious orange blotches. The common name, tulip poplar, reflects the large cup-like, "tulip shape" of the bloom. The individual fruits consist of narrow, flattened appendage (samara) with two tiny seeds embedded in the base. The samaras are tightly aggregated forming a light brown, spindle-like cone that often persists at the end of branches until early spring.

Distribution

Tulip poplar ranges from southern New England in the north, the Mississippi River Watershed to the west and northern Florida in the south.

Habitat

Liriodendron tulipifera is most commonly found in upland forests, often growing in stands on slopes with incredibly straight trunks. In contrast, a secondary habitat, is coastal hardwood mineral flats of the southern Mid-Atlantic and Southeastern States. Seldom a major canopy component in non-riverine forested wetlands, nevertheless these large trees are not unusually encountered. Tulip poplar, as a matter of fact, is a common tree along the natural levee of Lake Drummond in the middle of the Great Dismal Swamp, Virginia.

Ecological Value/Benefits

The cone-like fruits that remain on the tree throughout much of the winter season are a food source for cardinals and finches when seeds of other woody species have long disappeared.

Wetland Indicator Status

According to the *Draft Revision of the National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands, 1997*, *Liriodendron tulipifera* is classified as a **facultative upland plant (FACU)** for much of the northern sector of its distribution, but as a **facultative wetland plant (FACW)** in the southeastern coastal plain.

Liriodendron tulipifera L. -----



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