

The Stately Messy Cottonwood

By Judy Kuns, Erie County Master Gardener

The eastern cottonwood is a species of the poplar tree that bears triangular-shaped leaves, hence its scientific name, *Populus deltoides*. It is a fast-growing deciduous tree that prefers moist, well-drained soil and thrives near lakes and streams. Back in the days of pioneers and wagon trains, a row of cottonwoods in the distance was a welcome sight as it signified water on an often parched prairie. Cottonwoods can grow to over 100 feet tall, also making them easy to spot, and can live more than 100 years.

Cottonwoods are dioecious, meaning there are male and female trees. Only the female trees produce seed pods beginning when the tree is approximately ten years old. Before the foliage appears in the spring, the cottonwood develops a reddish ropey looking flower called a catkin that hangs from the branches. This is what develops into the seed pods that then burst open in early summer scattering white, fluffy cottony “snow.”

A petiole is the slender stalk by which a leaf is attached to the stem. Since the cottonwood leaf has a flat petiole which can be several inches long, it allows the leaves to flap side to side in the breeze, creating a peaceful, rustling sound.

Cottonwoods are hardy trees thriving in Zones 2-9 and, other than their preference for moist soil, are not fussy about growing conditions. However, they have a shallow root system which can be aggressive, so don't plant them near septic tanks or sidewalks.

Cottonwoods also are an invaluable wildlife habitat resource. Eagles build nests in their limbs, rabbits and deer thrive on twigs, bark and leaves, beavers use them for food, lodges and dams, and bees take advantage of the sticky gum of the cottonwood's buds to seal cracks in their hives.

Several species of woodpeckers not only feed on the insects that the tree supports, but also excavate nest cavities in them. Many other species of birds and mammals then use the abandoned woodpecker cavities for their nesting and roosting activities.

Most prevalent pests of the cottonwood are the petiole gall aphid and the more destructive cottonwood leaf beetle. Cottonwoods infested with gall aphids show signs of small bumps along the leaf stems. The bumps contain the overwintering aphids who split open the gall in springtime and release winged adult aphids. The aphids do not damage the tree and control isn't required. The Cotton leaf beetle, on the other hand, is a serious and quick defoliator, especially in younger trees. The beetle overwinters in the fallen leaf debris or under the tree's bark and emerges in warm weather to feed on the tree's foliage. If not severe, predatory insects kill the pests, but when severe, the tree may have to be treated with an insecticide.

If planted in the appropriate location where the soft wood and aggressive roots don't cause damage, cottonwoods make attractive, quick growing shade trees. By the time July rolls around and the leaves are rustling soothingly in the breeze and the eagles are soaring from their nest in the highest branches, it's easy to forgive the stately cottonwood for its messy, screen clogging “snow” of early June.