

Eastern Cottonwood Trees, The Good and The Bad

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It won't be long before it looks like it's snowing. Weather-wise, anything is possible in northern Ohio. But those tiny tufts of cotton that start floating through the air, giving the impression that even though it's finally summer, it's snowing. They are really the cotton-like fibers that surround the seeds of the Eastern Cottonwood tree.

The Eastern Cottonwood is one of several trees native to North America. It is easily spotted towering over houses and other trees in the area. It is a type of Poplar tree and a member of the Willow tree family.

It's not the type of tree a family would normally plant in the yard as part of a landscape design. In fact, Cottonwood trees are not readily available for sale in retail outlets. Landscape designers say the homes that do have them, may leave them as a part of the overall design of the yard, but many homeowners still lament having them in their yards.

The Eastern Cottonwood is easily spotted throughout the Midwest, the Great Plains and south-central United States. While it is mostly found in floodplains and along river bottoms, they are also found in dry soil areas.

Touted as an excellent shade tree, this rapidly growing species can reach 80 feet in height and 60 feet wide, although there are examples of trees much larger. The leaves, though not colorful in the fall, are dark green in summer. They are triangular in shape.

Many people misconstrue the cotton fiber as pollen. That is not the case. These deciduous trees are either male or female. The males' flowers shed enormous amounts of pollen (which can cause people with allergies to suffer in early spring). The female trees capture the pollen in their flowers for fertilization.

In late spring and early summer, the female tree releases small seeds surrounded by the cotton tufts for a two to three-week period. The "snow" carried by the winds is a nuisance to homeowners who find their screens coated with it and, in some cases, find their gutters and filters clogged with the material.

The trees' bark on mature trees is brownish gray in color and deeply fissured. The bark is one of the thickest of all native American trees.

The pioneers' early westward movement in the United States accentuated the positive aspects of Cottonwood trees. The leaves provided food for livestock and shade for settlers. The tree trunks could be craved into canoes and the bark was used as forage for horses and as a bitter medicinal tea. The trees were gathering places and served as trail markers. In the 19th century, the Union Pacific Railroad company used Cottonwood timber as cross ties on its new railroad beds.

Today, commercially, the Cottonwood tree is used to make plywood, matches, crates, food cases, boxes and paper pulp. The Cottonwood is a diffuse, porous hardwood. Its wood is lightweight, moderately soft and does not resist shock very well, but makes it ideal for shipping materials. The light color of the wood makes it highly desirable as a high quality of paper pulp. The wood is also used by artistes who carve wooden sculptures.

For the adventurers looking for new hobby during these disquieting times, it is possible to gather the tufts of “cotton” when it begins to gather on the ground, and to prepare it to be woven it into fabric.