

Eastern Cottonwood

Populus deltoides

Common name:

Eastern Cottonwood, Yellow Cottonwood, Big Cottonwood, Southern Cottonwood, Necklace Poplar, Carolina Poplar

Pronunciation:

pop-U-lus del-TOY-dez

Family:

Salicaceae

Genus:

Populus

"The life of a Cottonwood is short; at 75 years of age, it is already old, the heartwood eaten away by decay, and the hollow becomes the home of high-holder, the red-headed woodpecker and the sapsucker, perhaps, too, of owls, bluebirds, and starlings. A Cottonwood 125 years old is probably exceptional. Yet, in compensation, it grows faster than any of our other trees - 4 to 5 feet a year. In 15 years, a Cottonwood may be 60 feet high..."

(excerpt from Donald Culross Peattie, *A Natural History of Trees of Eastern and Central North America*)

Quick ID Tips

- Triangular "deltoid" bright green leaves with rounded, curved teeth on the edges
- Flattened leaf stalk allows the leaves to flutter in the slightest breeze
- Shiny brown, large resinous terminal buds that have a pine scent
- Bark on young tree is smooth greenish gray; on older tree, deeply furrowed

Details

- Deciduous tree, 75-100+ ft. While occasionally present in our area, this tree is the dominant arboreal feature of lowland riparian systems throughout the Great Plains and western states. It is a sure sign of wet areas, particularly riverbanks and floodplains.
- Bark is ash-gray and divided into thick ridges.
- Leaves alternate, simple, deltoid-ovate, or broad-ovate, 3-4" long and about as broad, tip acuminate, margin has coarse, curved teeth. Leaf is slightly hairy (glabrous) and bright green. Petiole is 2-3" long, flattened laterally.
- Terminal buds 1/2" or so long with 6-7 visible scales; shiny brown, and highly resinous; when crushed, emit a pine scent.

- Flowers in pendulous catkins, 2-3" long, appearing before leaves.
- Mature fruit (seed) in longer catkins 5-8" long, containing many capsules, that split and release tufted seeds -- the white "cotton" flying in the air in late spring.
- Prefers sun and moist habitats, but tolerates dry soils, saline conditions, and is very pH adaptable. Short-lived.
- Hardy in USDA Zones 3-9. Native range generally extends from Quebec to North Dakota, Kansas, Texas, Alabama, and northern Florida.
- *deltoides*: deltoid, triangular, shaped liked the Greek capital letter delta (Δ)



deltoid-shaped leaf



fall leaves



young bark



older bark



flower clusters, spring



seed release



plant habit



winter buds

Source:

- Oregon State University Landscape Plants, <https://landscapeplants.oregonstate.edu/plants/populus-deltoides>
- David Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Trees* (Knopf 2009)