The Tulip Tree in Peninsular Florida

(Liriodendron tulipifera)

by William D. Moriaty

One of Florida's finest large native trees is the *Liriodendron tulipifera* Linnaeus. A member of the Magnolia family, this species is known commonly as the tulip tree, tulip poplar, or yellow poplar.

**Range**

Its natural range is from southern Vermont and southern Illinois south to eastern Louisiana and northern Florida, with relict and endemic populations as far south as Orange and Hernando counties in central Florida. Largest trees are usually found in the Appalachian Mountains in the southeast, and the Ohio River valley. The only other member of this genus occurs naturally in the Orient, and is known as *Liriodendron chinensis*.

In Florida, native stands are most abundant along the sides of seepage slopes in the moist soils of the Panhandle, particularly from Jefferson County westward. Populous stands can also be found in Putnam and Duval counties, usually bordering streams and swamp hardwood hammocks. The tree was allegedly native to Alachua County, but was logged to extinction. The only examples there are planted ones, with several noteworthy specimens on the University of Florida campus.

In the remainder of the central part of the Peninsula, however, their numbers decrease dramatically as growing conditions for this species become more difficult due to soil content, hydrological extremes, lack of winter chill, and intensified solar conditions.

Nevertheless, large specimens can be found in several locales in the Peninsula. It is not uncommon for populations of these specimens to be up to 90 miles from one another. Natural stands with these specimens are most abundant along the Wekiva River and its tributaries in Orange, Lake, and Seminole counties. The best viewing on foot is at Kelly Park in Orange County, where several large specimens can be seen by crossing Rock Springs Run and surveying areas just southwest and north of the main path. Kelly Park is north of Apopka just east of SR 435. Toward the west coast, several specimens are growing in and near McKethan Park, which is north of Brooksville on the west side of U.S. 41. These Hernando County examples can be found by a little woods walking just south of the entrance road, and just east of the intersection of the lake loop road.

Planted examples in the Peninsula can be found in the following locations:

- Ocala, Marion County—Town Square, downtown, SR 40.
- Orlando, Orange County—Lake Eola Park, north side of lake, just south of Robinson Avenue.
- EPCOT Center, Orange County—Communicore West, west side of building.
- Tampa, Hillsborough County—Armenia Avenue, west side of pavement on the grounds of a funeral home.
- Tampa, Hillsborough County—Jesus High School, north entrance road. Specimen may have taken a lightning hit three years ago; appears to be recovering.
- Tampa, Hillsborough County—Corporex Business Park, Buffalo Avenue, extreme southwest end of entrance road. Strangely, it is sheared annually to a height of about ten feet.
- St. Petersburg, Pinellas County—Bay Pines Veterans Administration Hospital, north of Building 2, and at the police station.

**Culturing**

*Liriodendron* performs best in moist (but not wet), organic soils, typically from Orange County northward. I have seen a few healthy examples, however, as far south as Arcadia in DeSoto County, so if the soil is enriched and watering is tended to during drought periods, its range of growth can be extended farther south.

Plant in full sun or partial shade. Full sun will usually produce the finest shaped tree (generally pyramidal to

Chuck McCartney is a lifelong Floridian, and specializes in orchids. He has written several articles about Florida’s species of these beautiful plants for The Palmetto.
upright), while partial shade usually produces the largest, most dramatic leaves.

Although I would not recommend the tree for dry situations (even though I have seen one thriving for close to ten years now in a Sand Pine Scrub community north of Clearwater), if you really want one in your sandy location, apply a minimum of two inches of punk trees (melaleuca) mulch or pine bark over your enriched back fill.

Problems

Premature defoliation (during July and August), extended dormancy (up to late April), leaf black spot, scale, and occasional twig blights are some of the problems. Try to purchase seedlings grown from native Florida specimens.

Leaf shape

One of this tree's attributes—other than fast growth, shade, and its two-inch, yellow-with-orange-base, May-blooming flowers—is its attractive leaf shape. This shape can display dramatic differences based on both age and locale. Young specimens between one and ten years of age generally have large (up to 14 inches), deeply lobed, saddle-to-lyre-shaped leaves (tulip-like, by other descriptions), regardless of seed origin (Illustration A). After ten years, the leaf shape loses the deep lobing and in the northern states south to the Piedmonts becomes typical as shown in Illustration B. In Florida, particularly native specimens from the Peninsula, leaf lobes become almost absent, as shown in Illustration C.

Remember to give **Liriodendron** plenty of room to grow, and don't plant them under power lines. Several examples in Jefferson and Columbia counties are well over 100 feet high.

This native tree, even with the problems that may occur this far south, is aesthetic and desirable. It is a species that—much like the pignut hickory, sand pine, turkey oak, longleaf pine, and south Florida slash pine—is not being planted often enough to offset those lost to development. Because of this, T.R.E.E. Inc. is targeting a program to reintroduce it in Alachua, Orange, and Hernando counties.

William Moriaty, Affiliate ASLA, is president of Tampa Bay Reforestation & Environmental Effort, Inc. (T.R.E.E.), and a frequent contributor to The Palmetto.

---

**ELEVENTH ANNUAL FNPS SPRING CONFERENCE**

**May 3, 4, 5, 1991**

**University of Central Florida, Orlando**

Host: Tarflower Chapter

Some splendid speakers have agreed to participate, including:

Wayne King, Florida Museum of Natural History, Gainesville

Tom MacCubbin, Orange County Agricultural Extension

Melva Macfie, The Nature Conservancy

Bob Fields, environmental scientist, Devcon Design Group

Lynn Stein, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

Ed Gilliam, Asst. Professor of Ornamental Horticulture, University of Florida

Bill Partington, retired director, Florida Conservation Foundation, and former executive director, FNPS

Henry Swanson, retired Orange County Agricultural Agent

Pat Burkett, Seminole Co Environmental Education

Earl Wells, executive vice president for Florida Nurseriesmen and Growers Association

Field trips will include:

Turtle Mound, New Smyrna Beach, with Dr. Eliane Norman

Scrub hike with Kathleen Hale

University of Central Florida's Arboretum with Dr. Henry Whittier

David Drylie's Green Images Native Plant Nursery

Leu Gardens with Steve Harrison

Rusty Abdalla's native plant yard

Special events:

Friday evening: Wine-tasting social with wines made from Florida grapes grown on grafts on Florida native grape stock.

Exhibit of butterflies on Florida native plants.

Saturday evening: Awards banquet

Accommodations will be available at a nearby Holiday Inn.

**CALL FOR PAPERS**

The Tarflower Chapter is calling for papers to be presented at the Eleventh Annual Spring Conference, May 3, 4, 5, 1991, at the University of Central Florida. Please contact Dr. Jack Stout, Dept Biological Science, UCF, Box 25000, Orlando 32816.