



*The straight trunk of massive tuliptrees have made them attractive for a great many uses. All photos by author.*

## **Towering Sentinel**

*The fast-growing tulip poplar easily dwarfs neighboring structures as it provides a shady retreat.*

By J. Morton Galetto, CU Maurice River

Watching over one of Millville's hubs of creative undertakings is a stately sentinel; its imposing presence is familiar to all who visit. In May it blossoms with greenish-yellow and orange epaulets that command one's attention. Its impressive 100' height and 75' spread towers over the hill upon which it sprouted as a sapling. It dwarfs the Barn Studio that houses the Maurice River School of Art and its students. The hill is part of land owned by artist laureate Pat Witt, who welcomes all who visit. However, when it comes to protecting the tulip tree her rule is a steadfast "Look but don't touch." She would probably be the first to tell you that you really can't own a tree, only appreciate it.

Whenever I have attended Barn Day in the spring, invariably one of the young art students will warn me to keep a safe distance from the tree. I know exactly where this respect comes from, and I smile at the mental image of Pat teaching her aspiring younger artists a lifelong veneration for trees.



*Barn Studio, Millville, New Jersey, home of the Maurice River School of Art, in the shade of a beloved tulip poplar.*

The tulip tree's scientific appellation is *Liriodendron tulipifera*, but its common

names are many: tulip tree, tulip poplar, tulip magnolia, whitewood, yellow poplar, whitewood, and canoewood. It is native to the eastern third of North America and is New Jersey's tallest and likely fastest-growing tree, reaching heights of 200' although more commonly closer to 100'. In fact I often tell people in their 50s and older that if they want to see a sapling reach tree status, they ought to plant a tulip poplar.

The leaves of this deciduous tree are distributed alternately on the branch, as opposed to opposite one another. Each is squarely shaped with 2-4 lobes, shiny dark green on the upper side and a dull, lighter green beneath. In fall the leaves turn a yellow color. Together its broad leaves cast a massive swath of shade beneath its often immense presence.

It grows extensively along the slopes of waterways. Its roots seek moisture but it thrives best in moist drained soils within mixed woodland. If you want to see some massive stands of tulip poplar, the most impressive ones I have witnessed are in Susquehanna State Park near Havre de Grace. There their 120'+ straight trunks masterfully line many roadways and extend into the forest.

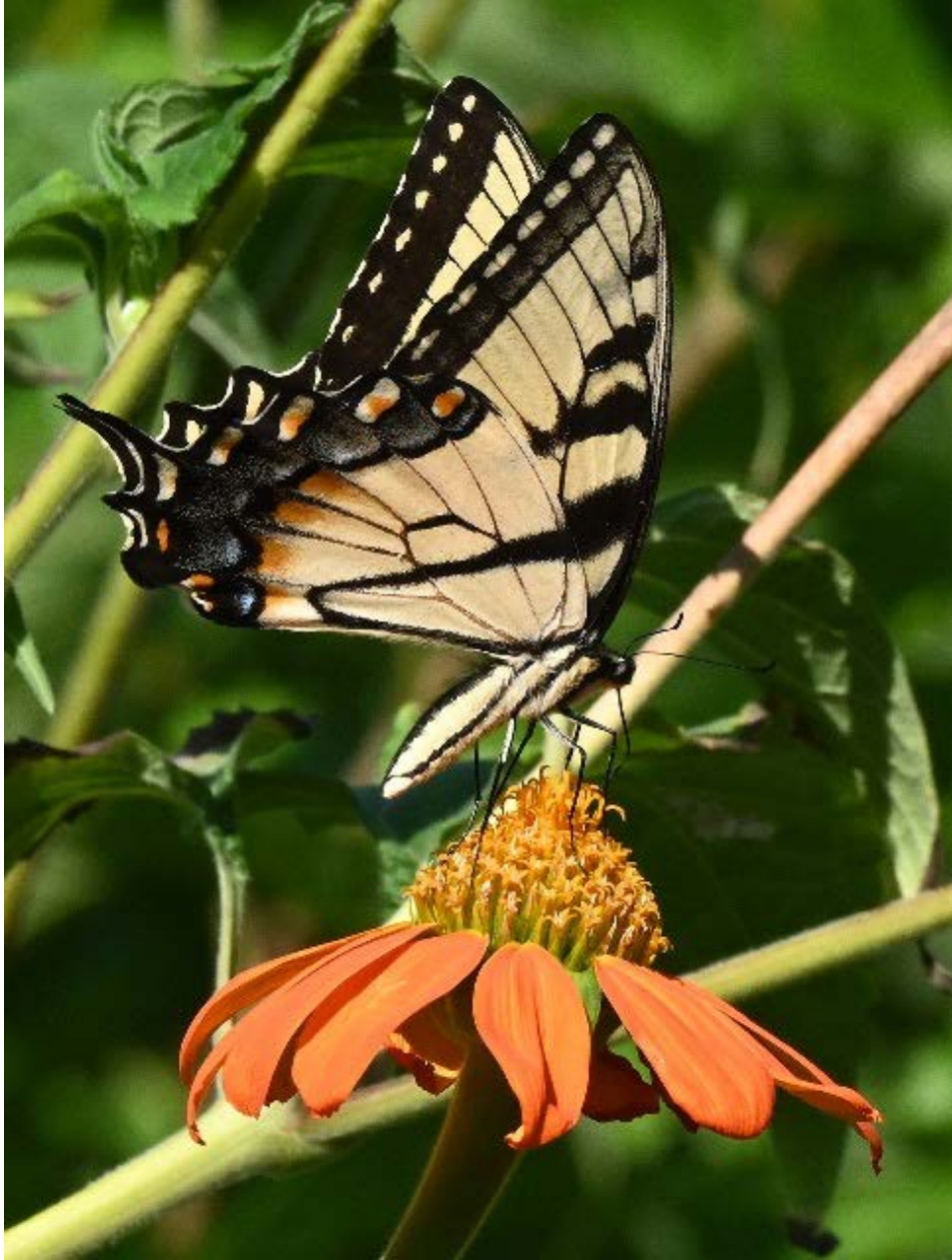
I was prompted to write about our subject because currently the river is lined with poplars in full bloom, and many of them are great specimens which tower over the shorelines. The name tulip tree derives from the fact that the flowers are tulip-like in appearance. The fruit is a samara, or winged seed. These are held together in clusters that resemble a cone. The samara often stays on the tree throughout the winter, persisting into late spring. These upright features make the tree identifiable in winter. While the seeds are how the tree propagates, they are often not fertile.



*Tuliptree in May with this year's blossom and last fall's samara.*

The tree's straight trunks have made it especially useful in construction. The native Cherokee used the wood for canoes and medicinal purposes, which we will explore shortly. Miners secured mineshafts with tulip poplar timbers. Today it is still valued for furniture because it has a fine grain and is a stable hardwood. Its coloration is variable, including cream, yellow, green, brown, and even purple hues, such that when staining, uniformity is difficult to achieve. Therefore it is primarily utilized in portions of the furniture that are not displayed: e.g. drawer liners, hidden casework, or painted projects. However choice pieces have been used for veneers. Its pulpwood is also processed for paper production

As you may recall, each butterfly and moth has evolved to be reliant on optimal food sources called host plants. The tulip tree is a host plant for the following moths: Tulip-Tree Beauty, Polyphemus, Promethea, and Sweetbay Silkmoth. The larvae of all of these species are sizeable. It is best known as a host plant for the beloved Tiger Swallowtail, a large, showy yellow butterfly.



(please scroll)



*Tuliptree is a host plant for Tiger Swallowtail butterfly (top). The tiger swallowtail's various instars (molts) have an appearance that acts to fool predators. The fifth and final instar, pictured here, is shaded in dark green on top and lighter green on the sides and posterior end, allowing it to camouflage itself better against foliage.*

Native American uses for *liriodendron tulipifera* extended beyond making 30'-40' canoes and cribs into medical treatments. Cherokees made an infusion with bark which was taken for pinworms and cholera infantum – a gastroenteritis in children that is often fatal. Cough syrup was made from its bark. It was further used as a dermatological aid for wounds and for control of fever. It was given as a sedative for women with "hysterics and weakness." Bruised bound leaves were bundled around the head of nerve pain sufferers. A tincture for snake bites has also been attributed to



the tulip tree. Cherokee used it in the making of honey, as do people even today.

Modern research is exploring essential oils obtained from the tulip tree for properties that may help combat brain tumors and malignant melanoma.

Back to the Barn Studio, on one particular Barn Day I was envisioning draping a clothes line around the tulip tree in order to hang children's art works with clothespins. A young student came up to me and warned me not to implement my plan.

"That's a magic tree, and you can't do that or Ms. Pat will be very upset."

On reflection I think the child was correct: Tulip trees are magical. That being said, I suggest you go outside and experience its marvels and grandeur for yourself.

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