

## *Cladrastis kentukea* (Yellowwood)

### Pea Family (Fabaceae)

#### Introduction:

Yellowwood is thought to be our best medium-sized, native flowering tree. Its white, fragrant, pea-like flowers hang in 15-inch-long clusters in spring, and, in some years, the tree offers attractive yellow fall foliage. Yellowwood also has a beautiful framework of branches that provides winter interest, but the tree's multiple trunk habit makes it prone to limb breakage at the crotch. It must be pruned to ensure strong branch angles.

#### Culture:

This tree prefers deep, moist, fertile, well-drained loam or moist sandy soil with a medium acid pH. It is hardy in zones 4 to 8. It will tolerate both high pH and acidic soils. Although it likes full sun, yellowwood does well growing in the forest. It flowers best in full sun.

Yellowwood must be pruned to ensure strong branch angles, or it will break apart. It should be pruned in summer, as the tree bleeds when pruned in spring. Pruning needs to be done in the nursery and for several years after the tree is in the landscape. It should be grown with a single leader as far up as possible, and pruned to develop wide-spaced branches that have wide angles to the trunk as well as a U-shaped crotch. If left unpruned, yellowwood will often fall apart after 30 to 40 years.

Yellowwood has no serious disease or insect problems. It has thin bark that is easily damaged, however, so care should be taken when working around it.

#### Additional information:

A prime ornamental characteristic of yellowwood is its low-branching form with a broad, rounded crown of delicate branches. Its slender, zigzagging stems are smooth and reddish brown. The tree's beautiful branch framework adds winter interest, enhanced by its smooth, gray bark. Yellowwood gets its common name from the yellow color of its heartwood when freshly cut. Its scientific name means "brittle branch."

The root bark of yellowwood was used as a dye by early settlers in the southern Appalachians. The tree's wood was once used to make gun stocks.

Transplanting yellowwood is easy — the tree should be balled and burlapped and transplanted when it is still small. Botanist Andre Michaux discovered yellowwood in the winter of 1796. There is only one yellowwood species in North America. There are others in Asia.

Yellowwood won a Pennsylvania Horticultural Society Gold Award in 1994.



#### Botanical Characteristics:

**Native habitat:** North Carolina to Kentucky and Tennessee. Scattered throughout Illinois, Indiana, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Missouri and Oklahoma.

**Growth habit:** Low-branching tree with a broad, rounded crown.

**Tree size:** Reaches a height of 30 to 50 feet with a spread of 40 to 55 feet.

**Flower and fruit:** Flowers are white, fragrant and pea-like, about 1 inch long and hang in 15-inch-long racemes in mid-May. The tree flowers when it has reached a height of 12 to 18 feet, and produces a larger number of flowers every other year or every third year. Fruit is a flat, thin dehiscent pod, about 4 inches long and inconspicuous.

**Leaf:** Pinnately compound, alternate, up to 1 foot long, with seven to 11 leaflets up to 4 inches long. Leaves are yellowish green when they open in spring, turning bright green in summer, then yellow in fall.

**Hardiness:** Winter hardy to USDA zone 4.