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How to Grow a Cottonwood Tree



Photo Credit: Suzanne Tucker

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Learn How to Identify, Plant, Grow, and Care for Cottonwood Trees

By [Andy Wilcox](#)

Last Updated: April 16, 2025



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Stately and huge cottonwood trees are found throughout many regions of North America. If your yard needs shade in a hurry, this attractive tree may be the ticket. Learn how to identify, plant, grow, and care for cottonwood trees.

About Cottonwoods

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Eastern cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) is a member of the willow family and is native to North America. Botanically speaking, a cottonwood tree is a type of poplar tree.

It's typically found in low areas alongside streams, rivers, and lakes. Native American tribes used its trunks to make canoes and the bark for medicinal tea.

They are huge trees, reaching 70 to 100 feet tall, with trunks commonly 4 feet wide or more. And if you're looking for a fast-growing tree, this is it. Cottonwoods can put on 5 or 6 feet per year, making them the fastest growing trees in North

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The bark of an Eastern cottonwood tree. Credit: Aleksandra Duda

Rapid growth does come with problems, namely reduced strength. Cottonwoods often lose a branch during storms or heavy winds, and while they aren't short-lived like some hybrids, they commonly live to be about 80 to 100 years old.
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Eastern cottonwoods are quite cold hardy and can be planted in USDA Zones 2 to 9.

How to Identify Cottonwood

S

Cottonwoods can be identified by their form and leaves. In terms of form, the tree is huge, with wide and spreading branches that give it a sculptural look for architectural interest, especially in the winter. The twigs are stout and gray-yellow in color.

The leaves are large, simple, and triangular-shaped with a notched margin and a sharp point. They grow in an alternate pattern on flat stems, and the foliage rustles attractively in the breeze, adding shimmering beauty and a lovely sound. In autumn, their foliage turns a beautiful golden yellow.



Cottonwood trees are female or male.
The female trees produce the cotton
seen here.

The cottonwood name refers to the cottony substance attached to the seeds.

However, it's only female trees produce cotton. You can buy either a male or a female tree.

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PLANTING

When to Plant Cottonwood

Cottonwoods are commonly purchased as bare-root seedlings or established stock in nursery containers. Bare-root cottonwoods should be planted as soon as possible after receiving them and do best when planted in the spring while the trees are still dormant.

Containerized cottonwoods may be planted at any time during the growing season. While spring planting is favored in northern areas, as long as they're in the ground a month before the first frosts, they'll have time to establish new roots before winter.

Where to

Select a site with full sun. Cottonwoods will also grow in partial sun, but the brighter, the better for these trees. They aren't picky about soil type and will grow in most soils as long as they aren't constantly waterlogged. While neutral pH is ideal, cottonwoods will grow in a wide range of soil conditions.

Cottonwoods grow fast and large and frequently shed branches in storms. Avoid planting them where a future falling branch could cause damage. They are great shade trees, so don't plant them where they'll cause problems in your garden as they increase in size.

How to Plant a Cottonwood Tree

- Remove all sod and debris from the spot.
- Dig a hole the same depth as the root ball and at least twice as wide. The hole should resemble a shallow bowl, not a well. Keep the excavated soil handy.
- Loosen the soil around the edges and bottom of the hole. Hard compacted soil will make it difficult for new roots to penetrate (or water to drain).
- Remove the cottonwood tree from its container and prune any circling or girdling roots. Root-bound plants benefit from scoring the root ball to stimulate new growth outwardly.
- Test fit the cottonwood in the hole. Check for depth and ensure no roots are bent over or circling the hole.
- Backfill the hole with the native soil you removed, keeping the tree vertical while filling. Tamp the soil firmly around the roots to remove air pockets.

Continue filling the soil around the roots and firming it with your hands.

- Mulch around the tree, about 3 to 4 inches thick. Spread the mulch evenly in a circle extending 2 feet from the trunk. Don't allow the mulch to touch the tree—keep an inch or two of space.

GROWING

How to Grow Cottonwoods

Cottonwoods are quite happy to take off without a lot of help from you. However, some supplemental watering during the first year will help them establish. If you are planting a specimen tree in the yard, a deer exclosure around the young tree will help it avoid being lunch or a scratching post.

Fertilization of cottonwoods is unnecessary. Choose a spot with full sun and

How to Prune Cottonwoods

Pruning young cottonwoods is only needed to remove dead and broken branches or to shape the tree for aesthetics. Cottonwoods can be pruned at any time of year.

How to Propagate Cottonwoods

Eastern cottonwoods can be propagated by collecting fresh seed, which germinates rapidly. However, they are most commonly (and more easily, in my opinion) propagated with cuttings.

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- During winter, take cuttings of small-diameter stems from last year's growth. The cuttings should be about a foot long and have a terminal bud.
- Wrap cuttings in plastic wrap to keep them from drying out and store them in the refrigerator.
- In early spring, stick cuttings in moist potting soil or damp sand, burying all but the top couple inches with the bud.
- Keep moist but not soggy, and wait for new growth!

Types

As discussed above, if you'd like to avoid the mess of "cotton" blowing around in the yard and clinging to your laundry line, car windshield, and window screens, then plant only male trees. The females make the cotton-covered seeds disperse in the wind.

▲ Eastern cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*)

- Black cottonwood (*P. balsamifera*):
grows west of the Rocky Mountains
- Fremont cottonwood (*P. fremontii*):
grows in California and Southwest

GARDENING PRODUCTS



PESTS/DISEASES

- The cottonwood leaf beetle is the primary pest that can affect these trees.
- Fall webworm
- Cottonwood leaf aphids

Learn more about dealing with common insect pests of cottonwood trees.

WIT AND WISDOM

- Cottonwood's proclivity to sprout from cuttings makes it a common choice for stabilizing waterway banks to prevent erosion. Thousands of cuttings are stuck in the soil like a forest of sticks, and they take right off.
- The National Champion Cottonwood Tree in the United States is in Beatrice, Nebraska. It stands 88 feet tall, has a 108-foot canopy spread, and a total trunk circumference of 36 feet, 9 inches.

SHRUBS AND TREES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Wilcox



Andy Wilcox is a flower farmer and master gardener with a pas-

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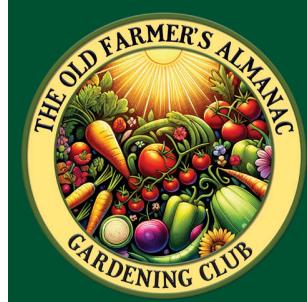
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COMMENTS

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JERRY RADBERRY (not verified) 5 days 7

hours ago

IF YOU HAVE DOGS YOU DON'T WANT
COTTONWOODS ANY PLACE CLOSE TO YOU
THE ARE STICKIE ABD HELL TO GET OUT OF
THERE FUR PLUS THE COTTON SEED FUZZ
WILL PLUG UP YOUR AC

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[REPLY](#)

They say good to plant near water, but not if anybody hopes to fish! The cotton fills your line every cast. Also the cotton will fill the screens of your house, and read more comments about what a mess they are year around. A branch almost killed me, dropping on a calm sunny day directly on where I was tending a flower bed.

Luckily I realized the "thunder" I heard was something threatening, ran toward the house and only got a few scratches. But it drove a 2-inch diameter piece 6 inches into the ground directly where I'd been kneeling.

REPLY

steve labriola (not verified) 6 months 3 weeks ago

Planted several on our acre in AZ, along with other species. They are beautiful; we keep them pruned.

REPLY

L R (not verified) 8 months ago

My dad made a swing out of a burlap sack filled with straw and hung it from a branch. The tree provided shade for the back yard for most of the day. So many memories under that big old cottonwood tree!

REPLY

Jeanette Copeland (not verified) 8 months ago

Do not plant cottonwoods anywhere in your yard! An arborist told me they are meant to be planted along riverbanks to prevent erosion but never a "city" tree. I had to have two removed from my yard many years ago, but unfortunately, another one grew from a seed and recently had it removed. Still sending up shoots that are impossible to fully eradicate!

REPLY

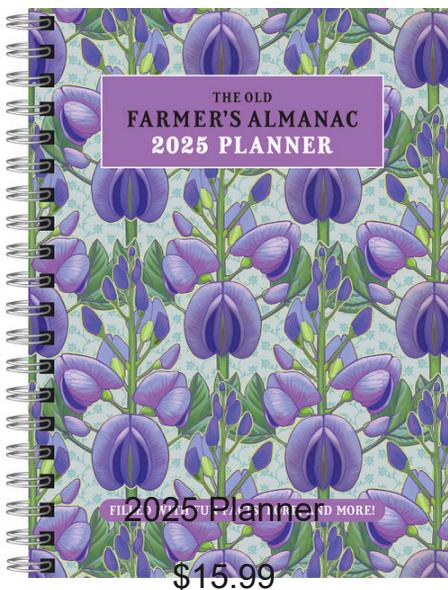
Laura (not verified) 8 months ago

Don't do it. Don't plant cottonwoods. They reproduce like weeds and are filthy every season,

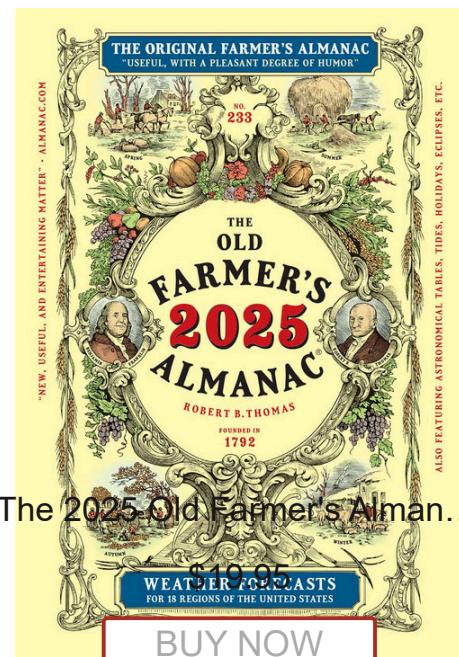
the seed pods drop then the millions of leaves fall.

[REPLY](#)

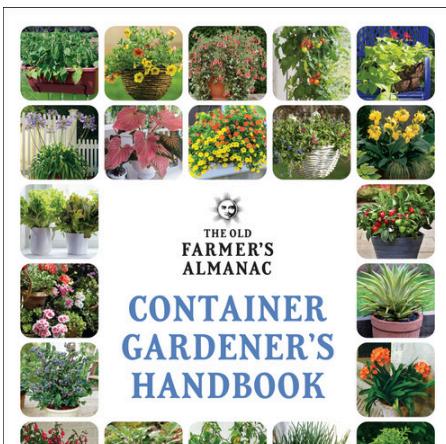
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