

Yellowwood *Cladrastis kentukea*

Cladrastis is from the Greek *klados* and *thraustos* which mean "branch" and "fragile" in reference to the brittle wood; *kentukea* means "of Kentucky." Yellowwood is named for the bright yellow heartwood. Other names include American yellowwood and *virgilia*.

Yellowwood is a rare tree native to isolated locations across the southeastern United States from North Carolina to Kentucky and Tennessee. Various references show it scattered in Indiana, Illinois, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Missouri and Oklahoma. Yellowwood typically occurs in rich, well drained limestone soils in river valleys, slopes and ridges along streams. Yellowwood is the only species of *Cladrastis* that is native to North America.

Yellowwood is among the rarest of trees in the eastern United States, but it is not ranked as a plant of conservation concern by the Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission.

Yellowwood is a medium sized, deciduous tree with a vase like form. It typically forks repeatedly and develops a broad rounded crown in full sun, but maintains a single tall stem much narrower form under dense shade. This tree typically grows 33 to 49 feet tall, exceptionally to 89 feet tall, with a broad rounded crown and smooth gray bark. The leaves are compound pinnate, 5 to 11 (mostly 7 to 9) alternately arranged leaflets. The leaflets range from 6 to 13 cm long and 3 to 7 cm broad with a thin to densely hairy underside. In the summer the leaflets are green and in the fall, the leaves turn a mix of yellow, gold and orange. Flowers bloom every 2 or 3 years and are fragrant, white, pea like flowers that hang from branches in late spring in 8 to 14 inch clusters, which makes it a beautiful ornamental tree. The fruit is 2 ½ to 4 inch long dry pod (legume) that ripens in the fall and persists into winter. The legume contains 4 to 6 brown seeds. These flowers are a good source of nectar for honey bees.

Native Americans used the wood for building and carvings and early settlers prized the wood for gunstocks. The root bark of yellowwood was a primary dye ingredient for early settlers in southern Appalachians. The bright yellow wood is used by woodworkers for small specialty items.

You can find yellowwood trees in the Salt Lake City Cemetery. As you start north on Main Street, you will find 7 Yellowwood planted on the east side of the parking lot.

