

The Empress or the Indian bean?

I often walk to the station and the village, not only for the exercise but also I love looking at street trees. On our first summer here, I thought I'd found a tree of my childhood, the Empress tree – *Paulownia tomentosa* – along Railway Parade, Leura. My earliest memory of the tree was when I was about 6, when we visited my great grandmother's garden, I was too young to take interest in the tree in the botanical sense but I loved the stories about it that the adults told me. Folk lore has it that when the phoenix flew across the land, it would only alight on a choice paulownia tree, bestowing prosperity to the household; therefore, every home garden should have a paulownia, just in case the phoenix decided to pay a visit. It was also a custom when a daughter was born that the parents planted a paulownia tree for her, when she marries, the wood will be harvested to make her a gift such as a jewellery box, or a pair of wooden clogs, which she will take with her to her new home and ... happiness ever after ...

I've always loved trees, especially trees with big heart-shaped leaves (being forever a romantic!). I first noticed my favourite leaves on some trees along Railway Parade, Leura, one summer afternoon when walking home with a friend I met on the train, we talked about the trees and he thought they were paulownia. As soon as I got home I looked up on



Paulownia
flowers and
seed pods

'paulownia tree'. How excited I became,

indeed, those big-heart-shaped-leaves trees fit the description of a paulownia. After so many years, many sweet memories began to flash back...

A paulownia in bloom
is a sight to behold



I remember the adults talking about the very

fragrant blooms, and the seed pods looking like clusters of nuts rattling in the wind on the winter bare branches. In springtime, the tree is a sight to behold with clusters of fragrant lilac flowers

appearing before the leaves unfold and sometimes the seed pods stay on the branches all through to the coming winter.

Now there was a very good incentive for me to walk to the station and to the village, for how else could I observe those trees of sweet old times? I looked forward to seeing the autumn foliage, listening to the rattling seed pods and enjoying the spectacular fragrant foxglove-like shaped lilac blossoms borne in long panicles in the days and seasons to come.

Days passed by, summer was nearly over, the leaves started to change colour and drop off, then came autumn and winter, there were bare branches, but no rattling seed pods that I could see or hear! Came springtime, there were no sign of flowers, yet the beautiful heart-shaped leaves started to unfold, then finally in late spring, panicles of creamy white (with a tinge of lilac and gold) bell-shaped flowers appeared among the green leaves! I had been dreaming of fragrant lilac blossoms without leaves and a real show of cascading blooms! I wondered how could I have missed the seed pods rattling in the wind during winter. May be these were a new variety of paulownia?

When the flowers were finished, I noticed some green bean-like drooping pods. Very strange! If these trees were paulownia, the leaves would only appear after the flowers, and the seed pods would not look like hanging beans. I decided to take a leaf and a bean-like seed pod to consult a horticultural expert. How easy it was for those who knew their trade, my puzzle was solved in an instant, those trees were not Paulownia, they were Catalpa; the two are from different botanical families, in spite of their resemblance in look, especially in summer when both are densely covered with similar-looking leaves. The major difference to the casual observer is that one has purple flowers in early spring, before leafing, while the other has creamy white flowers with a tinge in late spring, after leafing. As for the seedpods, paulownia has round ones and catalpa has long beanlike ones. Catalpa flowers appear in large clusters of creamy white bell-shaped corollas of 5 lobes with ruffled edges and orange, yellow or lilac interior. The long and thin shape of the seedpods gives rise to the common name 'Indian bean tree'. Why 'Indian', one might ask? Catalpa is said to be a mispronunciation of 'catawba', a Cherokee Indian word for 'wood'. Bean, of course, refers to the long pencil-like seed pod.



Catalpa flowers, leaves
and seed pods

So my empress is actually the Indian bean, not the Russian born princess Anna Pavlovnia, later Anna Paulownia, empress (queen consort) of the Netherlands. But I have grown to love the commoner Indian bean just the same; and I am now searching for a touch of royalty through my empress paulownia! I have not come across one in our Mountains parks or streetscape yet, but have seen one or two in private gardens.

The sad news for me is that my empress tree, long living, fast growing, frost hardy, drought tolerant, not too fussy about soil types, (alas with seeds that disperse too readily!) has now been listed, not quite as a threat yet, but as being invasive, and care should be taken in growing and containing it.