

“A Most Dangerous Tree”: The Lombardy Poplar in Landscape Gardening

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The history of the Lombardy poplar in America illustrates that there are fashions in trees just as in all else.

“The Lombardy poplar,” wrote Andrew Jackson Downing in 1841, “is too well known among us to need any description.”¹ This was an extraordinary thing to say about a tree that had been introduced to North America less than sixty years earlier. In that short time, this distinctive cultivar of dominating height had gained notoriety due to aggressive overplanting in the years just after its introduction.

The Lombardy poplar (*Populus nigra* ‘Italica’) is a very tall, rapidly growing tree with a distinctively columnar shape, often with a buttressed base. It is a fastigiate mutation of a male black poplar (*P. nigra*).² As a member of the willow family (Salicaceae)—North American members of the genus include the Eastern poplar (*Populus deltoides*), bigtooth aspen (*Populus granditata*), and quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*)—the tree prefers moist, rich soils but tolerates a wide range of conditions. Easily propagated from woody stem cuttings, it is hardy from Zone 9 to 3 and can attain its full height of one-hundred feet or more in twenty to thirty years. With a spread of only ten to fifteen feet, it presents a striking form in the landscape.

The Lombardy was disseminated throughout Europe in the mid-eighteenth century from Italy, where it was found growing on the banks of the Po River in Lombardy. There was speculation in the nineteenth century that it

may have originated in Persia or perhaps the Himalayan region; because the plant was not mentioned in Roman agricultural texts, writers reasoned that it must have been introduced to Italy from central Asia.³ But subsequent writers have thought it more likely that the Lombardy sprang up as a mutant of the black poplar. Augustine Henry found evidence that it originated between 1700 and 1720 in Lombardy and spread worldwide by cuttings, reaching France in 1749, England in 1758, and North America in 1784.⁴ It was soon widely planted in Europe as an avenue tree, as an ornamental, and for a time, for its timber. According to at least one source, it was used in Italy to make crates for grapes until the early nineteenth century, when its wood was abandoned for this purpose in favor of that of *P. nigra*. The first cuttings to reach England were planted at Blenheim,⁵ where the cultivar can still be seen.

It was the avid plant collector and landscape gardener William Hamilton who introduced the tree to North America. Documents indicate that his use of the tree followed practices in Great Britain and Europe. In 1788, a visitor to the Woodlands, Hamilton’s showplace on the Schuylkill River west of Philadelphia, wrote that the walks were “planted on each side with the most beautiful & curious flowers & shrubs. They are in some parts enclosed with the Lombardy poplar except here & there



Lombardy poplars on Boston's Fenway, 1919 (E. H. Wilson).

openings are left to give you a view of some fine trees or beautiful prospect beyond . . ." One of Hamilton's own letters indicates other uses. In 1789 he referred to a flower border "in front of the necessary [privy] skreen of cedars & Lombardy poplars." The leftover poplar cuttings were to be planted "in the Gaps long the orchard fence next the road placing them as not to exceed a foot from each other as the season is so far advanced they should be planted very deep or will fail. 2 Eyes above ground will be enough."⁶ The first American guide to planting, published in 1806 by Philadelphia nurseryman Bernard M'Mahon, also recommended it as a hedge.⁷ Its sheltering qualities were widely recognized, and for this purpose it was to be cut at top and sides to form a narrow green wall. "It is an excellent tree for sheltering or shading either fields or gardens in a flat country; but care must be taken to plant it at a sufficient distance; and, where shelter is

wanted without shade, not to introduce it on the south side of any garden or orchard, unless at a distance of at least twice its ordinary height."⁸

Easily propagated and rapid of growth, the Lombardy quickly became exceptionally popular and demand for it was high. A short thirteen years after its introduction at the Woodlands, a nursery in Newton, Massachusetts, devoted two full acres to its cultivation.⁹ The next year (1798), the Prince Nursery in Flushing, New York, advertised ten thousand Lombardy poplars for sale, each a height of ten to seventeen feet.¹⁰ By the early years of the nineteenth century it was said that "they infested the whole island [of Manhattan], if not most of the middle, northern, and many southern States."¹¹

European use of the Lombardy as an avenue tree had not gone unnoticed in North America. John Claudius Loudon had recorded in his influential *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum* of 1838 "an avenue of Lombardy poplars, the oldest and the highest in Germany; none of the trees are under 90 ft. high, and many of them are above 120 ft. Nothing of the kind can be more sublime."¹² In images of Boston made shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century, they can be seen lining Park Street, along the top of the Common. Americans, in a great hurry as always, prized the rapid growth that brought nearly instantaneous shade. No doubt they were very beautiful while they lasted, and they offered ancillary benefits: "The elevation of the tree is also favourable for inviting and protecting singing-birds . . . Since the streets of some of the American towns have been planted with Lombardy poplars, the [Baltimore] orioles are constant visitors . . ."¹³

There is nothing like widespread use to uncover the weaknesses of a plant, and the Lombardy's shortcomings got ample exposure. Problems appeared shortly after the tree came into widespread use on streets. Like other members of the genus, its wood is weak and prone to break. The roots disrupt sidewalk



The Lombardies that encircled the tomb of Jean-Jacques Rousseau at Ermenonville, France, formed one of Europe's most famous tree plantings. The tableau was often imitated (Promenade ou itinéraire des jardins d'Ermenonville [S. Girardin], 1788).



The 1915 caption read: "This tree has a special landscape value which no other tree possesses and under special conditions it can be used to better advantage than other trees" (LeVison, American Forestry, Vol. 21).

pavement above ground and penetrate and clog water and sewer pipes below ground. Boston's Park Street Lombardies were replaced by American elms as early as 1826. By 1871, an ordinance compelled the removal of existing specimens and banned the planting of new ones in Albany, New York. By then, many cities, including Washington, D.C., and Brooklyn, no longer tolerated the Lombardy.¹⁴

By mid-nineteenth century it had fallen from favor elsewhere, too. Downing, that period's chief arbiter of landscape taste and American disseminator of English practices, complained in 1841 that it had been so over-used as to become "tiresome and disgusting."¹⁵ Another writer commented in 1870 that

"when first introduced into this country the rage for it was so great that town streets, and country roads, and farm-house yards, were everywhere filled with them; but familiarity has bred contempt."¹⁶ Just before the turn of the twentieth century, Marianna Van Rensselaer noted that "we do not see it so often, although our fathers dearly loved to plant it. It has suffered much from disease in recent years, and, moreover, the canons of such gardening taste as we possess say that its formality is inappropriate in naturalistic landscape-scenes."¹⁷

Notwithstanding reservations, it was acknowledged throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth that properly used, the tree played a significant role in the land-

“A degree of sublimity”

John Claudius Loudon's *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum*, published in eight volumes over the years 1834 to 1837, remains an important compendium of centuries of information on British trees, native and introduced. In it, he gave eleven pages to the Lombardy poplar, saying, “We have been induced to enlarge on the subject more than we should have done, from seeing the frequent misapplication of the tree in the neighbourhood of London, as well as its good effects in various instances.”* He therefore offered several examples “to show how easy it is, by means of the Lombardy poplar, to add to the effect of a landscape, or to destroy the harmony of its different parts. In short, the Lombardy poplar, like the weeping willow and birch, is a most dangerous tree in the hands of a planter who has not considerable knowledge and good taste in the composition of landscape.” Below are some of Loudon's examples.

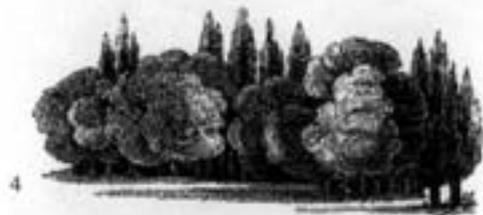


The Lombardy poplar, considered as a tall conical mass of foliage, becomes of great importance in scenery, when contrasted with round-headed trees. It is a known rule in the composition of landscape, that all horizontal lines should be balanced and supported by perpendicular ones; and, hence, the bridge [at Blenheim] in figure 1, displaying a long and conspicuous horizontal line, has its effect greatly increased by the poplars planted on each side of it. Not only the lines of the bridge are balanced and supported by the upright poplars, but lengthened and pleasing reflections from the water are produced; which, breaking the horizontal gleams of light, not only produce variety and richness, but by increasing the length of the perpendicular lines formed by the poplars, confer a degree of sublimity on the picture: since it is allowed by all writers on the material sublime, from Burke to Dugald Stewart, that gradually tapering objects of great height create the emotion of sublimity.

This poplar, or some equally fastigate tree, should appear in all plantations and belts that are made with a view to picturesque effect; as in figure 2 where the outline is varied as well as the face of the plantation. Masses of round-headed trees, such as figure 3, though they might be seen to advantage in some situations, when grouping with other objects,



yet, when contemplated by themselves, are quite uninteresting, from their dull and monotonous appearance; but add the poplars, as in figure 4, and you immediately create an interest and give a certain character to the group, which it did not before possess. . . . The branches of the poplars, rising stiffly upwards, contrast with, and render more graceful, the horizontal or pendant masses of the round-headed trees; and the stems of the poplars being clear of branches to a greater height than the other trees, form an agreeable variety in the lower part of the group.



* Loudon, *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum*, Vol. III (London. A. Spottiswoode for the Author, 1838), 1660–1670.

scape. Downing recognized its beauty and the elegant effect it could produce when employed to give "life, spirit, and variety to a scene composed entirely of round-headed trees . . . when a tall poplar, emerging here and there from the back or centre of the group, often imparts an air of elegance and animation to the whole."¹⁸ In L. H. Bailey's influential *Standard Cyclopaedia of Horticulture*, first published in 1900, it was recommended "to give such points of emphasis in green landscape as does the church-spire in the village."¹⁹ And the Lombardy was surely one of the plants Guy Lowell had in mind when he wrote in *American Gardens* in 1902:

An American traveling abroad is sure, after seeing the formal gardens of Rome and of Northern Italy, to wish to reproduce them in some form in his own country. He does not always remember that climatic conditions are not the same . . . different flowers, trees, and hedges have to be used in attempting to produce effects similar to those in Italy, for it is impossible to grow here many of the broad-leaved evergreens which give so much character to the villa gardens of Rome. The lines and masses may be similar, the principles of design may be the same, but the effect in detail is different, for different elements must be used, or must needs be changed to meet new conditions.²⁰

The resemblance of the Lombardy's narrow, aspiring head to that of the Italian cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*) came in very handy in the Gilded Age when wealthy Americans acquired the taste and means to import European models of landscaping. In an early, relatively modest instance, artists and writers, beginning with the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens in the 1880s, transformed New England farmhouses in Cornish, New Hampshire, into versions of hillside Italian villas. A 1906 article in *Century Magazine* described Saint-Gaudens' use of Lombardies:

Lombardy poplars have more than once been used with excellent effect by Cornish gardeners, and, what is rarer, with reserve . . . The single poplars, which, on Mr. Saint-Gaudens's place, stand one on each corner of the terrace



Cypress Alley, Villa Gamberaia, Italy, as illustrated in An Introduction to the Study of Landscape Design by H. V. Hubbard & Theodora Kimball, 1915.

are planted solely for their architectural value. The house is rather narrow and high. These tall, slender "Lombardys" seem to belong to the scheme of the house and bring it into better proportion.²¹

It was in Cornish, on his own property and that of four neighbors, that the artist, architect, and landscape designer Charles Platt developed the Italianate villa style that played such an important part in the country house movement in turn-of-the-century America. He used the Lombardy as Italians use their cypress, to frame views and accent architecture.²²

The poplar's susceptibility to disease has been problematic since its earliest years of cultivation in Europe and North America. It is prone to a canker-forming fungus that kills the tree from the top down, destroying its shape and shortening its lifespan. Cryptodiaportha



An allée of Lombardy poplars directs visitors through the entrance of an estate in Lenox, Massachusetts, 1920 (Archives of the Arnold Arboretum).

canker, also known as *Dothichiza* canker, is one of the major diseases of poplars in general, but it affects the Lombardy most severely. Identified in the United States in 1915, the canker occurs wherever Lombardies grow, but regional conditions and the preexisting health of the individual plant appear to affect the extent of infection. No cure is known.²³

So while the Lombardy is still grown, especially in Mediterranean climates or more northern regions, for many of us in the Northeast it persists mostly as a memory. If Downing were writing today, he could no longer say that it is too well known to need description. For so many years a lead player in the cast of trees favored for landscape effect, it has become a bit player in most schemes.

But its splendidly dramatic size and form ensures a memorable impact whenever it makes an appearance.

Notes

¹ Andrew Jackson Downing, *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening* (1841; reprint, Little Compton, R.I.: Theophrastus Publishers, 1977), 154–155.

² W. J. Bean, *Trees and Shrubs Hardy in the British Isles*, 8th ed. (London: John Murray, 1976), 320. Bean writes that the so-called “female Lombardy poplars” are almost certainly seedlings of typical *P nigra* pollinated by “Italica,” and are generally less columnar than the male parent.

³ John Claudius Loudon, *Arboretum et Fruticetum Britannicum; or, The Trees and Shrubs of Britain*,

- Vol. III (London: A. Spottiswoode for the Author, 1838), 1661.
- ⁴ Augustine Henry, "The Black Poplars," *The Gardeners' Chronicle* (July 4, 1914) LVI, Third Series (1,436): 1-2.
- ⁵ Loudon, 1660, 1662.
- ⁶ Karen Madsen, "To Make His Country Smile: William Hamilton's Woodlands," *Arnoldia* (Spring 1989) 49(2): 19.
- ⁷ Bernard M'Mahon, *American Gardener's Calendar* (Philadelphia: B. Graves for the Author, 1806), 257.
- ⁸ Loudon, 1668.
- ⁹ U. P. Hedrick, *A History of Horticulture in America to 1860* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1950), 146.
- ¹⁰ Stephen A. Spongberg, *A Reunion of Trees* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 80.
- ¹¹ J. W. Francis *Old New York; Or Reminiscences of the Past Sixty Years* (New York: Charles Roe, 1858), 23, quoted in Spongberg, 60.
- ¹² Loudon, Vol. I, 147.
- ¹³ Loudon, 1666-1667, quotes *The Magazine of Natural History*, Vol. I, 418.
- ¹⁴ J. J. Levison, ed., "Ornamental and Shade Trees," *American Forestry* (October 1915) 21 (262): 995.
- ¹⁵ Downing, 152.
- ¹⁶ Frank J. Scott, *The Art of Beautifying Suburban Home Grounds* (NY: D. Appleton, 1870), 363.
- ¹⁷ Mrs. Schuyler [Marianna] Van Rensselaer, *Art Out-of-Doors* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 274.
- ¹⁸ Downing, 152.
- ¹⁹ Warren Manning, "The Art of Designing Landscapes," *The Standard Cyclopaedia of Horticulture*, ed. L. H. Bailey, Vol. II, 2nd ed. (NY: The Macmillan Company, 1928), 1786.
- ²⁰ Guy Lowell, Introduction, *The American Garden* (Boston: Bates & Guild Company, 1902), unpagged.
- ²¹ Frances Duncan, "The Gardens of Cornish," *Century Magazine* (May 1906) 72: 3-19.
- ²² Keith N. Morgan, *Charles A. Platt: The Artist as Architect* (NY: The Architectural History Foundation: 1985), 24-26. Morgan writes that Platt "worked broadly with existing stands of mature trees, favoring groves of birches and pines and adding Lombardy poplars for architectural accents."
- ²³ Wayne A. Sinclair, Howard H. Lyon, and Warren T. Johnson, *Diseases of Trees and Shrubs* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 1987), 184.

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