

Kentucky Champion Tree Program

The Real Ohio Buckeye – from a Kentucky Perspective










What is a buckeye? If you asked, the responses would probably depend on where the responder lives and what they're interested in. The buckeye to which I'm referring is not a mascot from that university about 200 miles north of Lexington, nor am I referring to natives from the state of Ohio. I am referring to an iconic tree that happens to be the state tree of Ohio—you guessed it—the Ohio buckeye.

This tree is not only native to Ohio and Kentucky, but is frequently found in moist habitats in the southeastern and central United States. It thrives in rich, moist soils but has the ability to grow in a variety of sites including alkaline soils and in full sun to partial shade. The Ohio buckeye is considered a medium-sized tree with a round canopy and usually matures with an equal height and spread of 20-40 feet. Kentucky's champion Ohio buckeye also follows this pattern with a height of 73 feet and a spread of 67 feet, but the circumference measures a whopping 172 inches. Not only is this magnificent specimen Kentucky's state champion, it is also a national co-champion.



Photo courtesy: Kentucky Division of Forestry

Comparison of Ohio buckeye, yellow buckeye and horse-chestnut

Ohio Buckeye				One of the first trees to leaf out in the spring. Each leaf has five elliptical leaflets that whorl out and average 4-6 inches in length. Fruit is a large, brown, spiny capsule with a smooth, oily nut inside that displays a light spot at the point of attachment. Has an unpleasant smell when plant is bruised resembling a skunk's odor.
Yellow Buckeye				A larger species, averaging 60-90 feet in height. Leaves whorled with larger leaflets 4-10 inches in length. The fruit is a rounded, leathery, three-part smooth capsule that usually contains multiple chestnut brown, smooth, and shiny nuts. No unpleasant smell when plant is bruised.
Horse-chestnut				Horse-chestnut usually has a rounded oval shape averaging about 50 feet tall with a similar spread. Leaves are whorled often with seven oval-shaped leaflets. Flowers are white and showy and can be 1 foot in length. The fruit is similar to buckeyes but averages 2 inches in size with a semi-spiny husk that contains a shiny nut. No unpleasant odor is present.

All photos courtesy: <http://www.ipfw.edu> except yellow buckeye fruit which is courtesy Wendy VanDyk Evans, Bugwood.org

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