



Kentucky Big Tree Program A GIANT Among Kentucky's Heroes

By Diana Olszowy

*American Basswood located in Lexington Cemetery.
Photos courtesy: Kentucky Division of Forestry*

Frequent visitors to the historic Lexington Cemetery are very familiar with the giant basswood sentinel that guards the monument to Kentucky's famous pre-Civil War statesman Henry Clay. Previously recognized by the American Forests Association as a national champion, this American basswood was recently dethroned by a larger specimen in Pennsylvania, but it still holds its state champion title. Rumored to be more than 300 years old, this quiet giant measures 21 feet and seven inches in circumference. It stands a mere 95 feet high (Clay's monument is 120 feet tall), and its massive branches spread out over 82 feet.

It was once rumored that the basswood was planted by Henry Clay himself, but if this tree is indeed 300 years old, it would already have been middle-aged by the time Clay was born. This means that the tree is older than the city of Lexington and the commonwealth of Kentucky.

The American basswood, also known as the linden, is a large and fast-growing tree. It is a common species in the eastern third of Kentucky. It averages 60 to 100 feet high and is frequently found in moist soils of valleys and uplands with yellow-poplar, American beech, and sugar maple.

It is a favorite street tree in urban areas because of its rapid rate of growth, plentiful shade, and fragrant flowers. It blooms in late June and is a preferred tree for beekeep-

ers. During the three weeks that the basswoods bloom, bees forsake most other flowers for the basswood. Its flowers have nectar that attracts bees and produces a strong-flavored white honey that is regarded as high in quality. The flowers, when gathered and dried, can be used to make tea and have even been used to make perfumes.

The wood from the American basswood is soft and creamy tan and is much preferred by woodcarvers because of its workability and its even grain. Thin strips can be bent to make baskets, chair seats, and honeycomb sections for beehives. It is widely used for woodenware, toys, barrelheads, boxes, crates, guitars,



Size comparison of the state champion American Basswood.

and artificial limbs.

The American basswood was a major source of fiber for many Native American tribes. Long strips of bark were peeled from sprouts and saplings and soaked in water for two or more weeks. The long, soft fibers were then twisted into cords and ropes for innumerable purposes: fishing lines, nets, cattail mats, tying the pole framework for wigwams and lodges, and sewing birch-bark together to make canoes or containers.

Big Tree Care

By *Diana Olszowy*

Every community has a neighborhood, a street or maybe just a city block that is the most attractive and desired part of town. Why? – Often because of its large shade trees! In some areas, large oaks, ashes and maples cover the older neighborhoods. Although these large magnificent trees may look invincible, they are mortal and in some point of time, they will die or become a public safety hazard. Each community faces the painful and often controversial decision of losing mature trees. So what can be done?

Similar to our own health, the life of mature trees and their benefits are extended through improved long-term health care, reduction of outside stress, and avoiding unnecessary changes through good common sense. Long-term health care for most mature trees should involve a program of pruning that is timely and concentrates growth on the best branches. Like a forest or garden, thinning can actually stimulate even the oldest trees to improve overall growth.

Trees are not susceptible to heart attacks and only in rare circumstances do mature trees die quickly over a period of several weeks, such as with Dutch elm disease or oak wilt. Trees generally decline and gradually die back due to outside stresses. In native woodlands, the primary stress factors are sunlight availability, insects and extremes of moisture and temperature. In an urban setting, drought is one of the most important stresses for our trees due to severe soil compaction. Stress to trees is an invitation to opportunistic secondary insects and disease that weaken and eventually shorten the tree's lifespan.

To help alleviate stress, trees should be placed on a program of deep and infrequent watering during droughty periods, and aeration of tight, compacted soils can be done easily by any homeowner, park personnel, or tree care professional (arborist). Trees prefer on average, an inch of precipitation per week to keep them

vigorous. In addition, a two-to-four-inch layer of mulch can provide trees with a stable root environment that is cooler and contains more moisture than the surrounding weeds and turf.

Avoiding accidents is often a matter of luck. Yet, by being defensive, we can survive those narrow escapes that mature trees experience over a lifetime. Protecting the root area beyond the tree's dripline during construction work or tunneling underground utilities rather than trenching can minimize human-caused stress. Fertilization is another important aspect of mature tree health care. A soil test can best determine the correct fertilizer mixture for your tree.

Consult an arborist for advice on application and the best time of the year and blend for each of your trees.

Large mature trees are community assets that have been ignored for too long. With proper care, our stately treasures will be around for our grandchildren to enjoy as well.



The dripline is the area around the tree extending to the exterior edge of the tree's live crown.



Shady Lane in Lexington, KY has mature trees requiring big tree care. Photo courtesy: Terry Conners

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