

Kentucky Champion Tree Program

An Uncommonly Rare Treat – American Smoketree

by Diana Olszowy

Most would scratch their heads in disbelief if they knew Kentucky is home to the National Champion American smoketree (*Cotinus obovatus*), not because it is the largest specimen of its kind, but because most have never heard of it. Some folks may have been lucky enough to see its cousin the smokebush and are familiar with the brilliant fall coloration it displays, but a tree version? This uncommon eastern U.S. native is a member of the sumac family (see Kentucky Woodlands Magazine – Vol. 5, Issue 1 for more information about sumacs) hence the showy fall colors. Unfortunately, smoketrees are also in the same family as poison ivy) and even it can display showy fall foliage. Smoketrees typically reach approximately 25-40 feet in height and usually obtain the same in crown spread. The National Champion is located in Lexington Cemetery in Fayette County and measures a whopping 101 inches in circumference and has a height and crown spread of 42 feet. This champ displays four- to five-inch-long leaves that are pinkish-bronze when young, mature to a lush, dark blue/green color and then in the fall, change into gorgeous shades of yellow, red, orange or purple, best described by a little five-year-old girl who called it the “skittle tree.”

The flower of American smoketree is another outstanding feature

of the species. The misty flower sprays resemble puffs of smoke emerging from the ends of branches. They bloom in early spring, usually between April and May, and are pollinated by insects. Smoketree is dioecious, which means that male and female flowers are borne on separate trees. Smoketree produces a small drupe and is a preferred food among native finches. Historically, the wood was used during the Civil War to make yellow and orange dyes which caused the tree to be almost harvested to the point of extinction. Smoketree is tolerant of a wide range of adverse urban conditions – wet soil, wind, drought and compacted soil. Plants grow well and are native to high pH, alkaline soils and should be located in full sun or partial shade. Best flowering, form and overall attractiveness is achieved in full sun. This species is relatively trouble-free given appropriate cultural conditions; however, it shares the brittle wood typical of other members of its family (Anacardiaceae), resulting in occasional storm damage.

If you are lucky enough to find an American smoketree in your local nursery garden center, I would suggest you snatch it up because you will indeed possess an uncommonly rare treat that will make your neighbors green with envy not just once during the year, but twice - in the spring and fall.

Lexington Resurrects Champion Tree Program

The city of Lexington’s Urban Forestry Program teamed up with the Division of Forestry and the Lexington Tree Board to resurrect the city’s Champion Tree Program. Over 80 native species were measured and included in the program. Among these nominees were 16 state champions and three national champions. The group intends to launch a “Benefits of Trees” public relations campaign, and Lexington residents will have the opportunity to visit all of the champs online. A future tree trail will be developed for those champs residing on public properties. For more information on Lexington’s Champion Tree Program, please contact the Urban Forestry Program at www.lexingtonky.gov or for information on Kentucky’s Champion Tree Program, contact Diana Olszowy at Diana.olszowy@ky.gov.

About the Author:

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The national champion American Smoketree is located at the Lexington Cemetery in Fayette County. This native, but relatively rare tree, has foliage that turns shades of yellow, red, orange and even purple in the autumn.

Fall color image courtesy www.cirrusimage.com/tree_American_smoke.htm



The flowering of the American smoketree gives a clue to how the tree received its common name.

Photo courtesy: www.fashionablegardener.com/2011/06/swath-of-color-smokebush-or-smoketree.html