



*Butternuts like the state champion in Pike County are becoming rarer and rarer because of the butternut canker disease. Butternuts are closely related to black walnut and are often called white walnut.*

*Photo courtesy: Diana Olszowy*

## I Can't Believe It's . . . Butternut!

*by Diana Olszowy*

# Kentucky Champion Tree Program

The community of Myra in Pike County, Kentucky is a small town located in the southwestern part of the county that has what many larger communities are envious of – a state champion tree. The champ is known as a butternut and is locally referred to as “white walnut” or “oilnut” and is a close cousin to the black walnut. Located on the property owned by Faith Baptist Church and next to the Myra Christian Academy, this beautiful specimen is quite content in its native surroundings and stands over and above all others.

Butternuts are not as common to Kentucky as they once were. Though they are not currently listed on the threatened or endangered species list, it is listed as a “Special Concern” species. This is mainly due to a serious disease called butternut canker. It has been estimated that nearly 80 percent of the butternut has been killed out by this pathogen. Learn more about Butternut Canker on page 21.

Butternuts are native to the eastern U.S., ranging from Michigan into New England and south to northern Alabama and northern Arkansas. They can grow in a variety of sites and at higher elevations than black walnut; however, they prefer stream banks and coves on well-drained soils. Butternuts average 60 to 70 feet in height and 15 to 30 inches in circumference with the exception of our champ, which is 88 feet tall and 110 inches in circumference (that's more than 9 feet around).

Butternuts begin to produce seed around 20 years of age, and optimum production is from 30 to 60 years of age. Their nuts are similar in size to black walnut but instead of a round husk, butternut has an oval husk; they produce bountiful crops every two to three years. The nuts are sweet and have a pleasant flavor and are often used in baking and making candies. “White walnut” is more valued for its nuts than its timber. The wood is light in weight and highly rot resistant, but is much softer than black walnut wood and lacks the deep rich color. Bark and nut rinds were once finely ground up and used to dye cloth, and an extract from the inner bark was used to treat for smallpox, dysentery and other stomach and intestinal discomfort.

This butternut holds two champion crowns—one for the largest specimen in the state and the other, and definitely more important—it's a survivor!



*The butternut leaf and fruit are similar to that of walnut but on closer inspection the differences become obvious. The husk of the butternut fruit is oval, hairy and sticky. Leaves are pinnately compound and contain 11 to 17 leaflets that are 2 to 4 inches long and wrinkled above.*

*Photos courtesy: Paul Wray,  
Iowa State University, Bugwood.org*

#### **About the Author:**

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