

# Kentucky Champion Tree Program

## Our State Heritage –

## The Kentucky Coffeetree

by Diana Olszowy

Photos courtesy: Diana Olszowy

Many decades ago, it was discovered that Kentucky's legislature had never officially established a "state tree." Folks had considered the tulip poplar (a.k.a. yellow-poplar) to be Kentucky's "unofficial" state tree, as it is in the neighboring states of Tennessee and Indiana. But a different scenario was being played out by the late Joe Creason, a Louisville Courier-Journal columnist, who is credited for initiating and rallying support for making the Kentucky coffeetree the state tree. Through his efforts, the Kentucky coffeetree became the "official" state tree of Kentucky on March 8, 1976.

However, in 1994, the General Assembly changed the "official" state tree to yellow-poplar, due to its abundance and economic importance to the state. This decision did not sit well with students from Bethel Elementary School in Bath County (burial place for Joe Creason), who strove to keep the Kentucky coffeetree the state tree. These students were worthy representatives for the late Joe Creason, because through their efforts, on Arbor Day 1994, Brereton C. Jones, governor at that time, and proclaimed the Kentucky Coffeetree as the State Heritage Tree recognizing its historical significance to the Commonwealth. Speaking of worthy representatives, the state champion Kentucky coffeetree is the pride of the city of

Prospect. Nestled in the community's Putney Pond and Woodlands area, the champion measures a whopping 10 feet in circumference and stands over 100 feet in height. The 25-acre Putney Pond and Woodlands area was purchased with grant assistance from the Kentucky Heritage Land Conservation Fund and is a unique, old-growth urban forest remnant with large American beech, sugar maple, and yellow-poplar and it is now the home of a champion.

The Kentucky coffeetree is usually a medium-size tree attaining a height of 40-75 feet and a trunk circumference of 12-24 inches. Coffeetrees produce short, stubby branches, often with twisted, gnarly twig tips if growing in the open. They drop their large, bipinnate

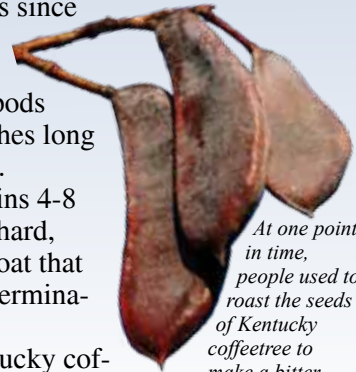
leaves (1-3 feet long), at the first sign of frost, and since new leaves don't usually appear until very late in spring (late May/early June), the tree is bare for about six months of the year. The coffeetree is a dioecious species, which means that the male and female flowers are borne on separate trees, which makes the male trees popular for ornamental plantings since they do not produce the large, heavy seedpods. The seedpods range from 6-10 inches long and 1-2 inches wide.

Each seedpod contains 4-8 seeds which have a hard, impermeable seed coat that prevents or delays germination.

The wood of Kentucky coffeetree is a strong, heavy wood used in general construction, cabinet work, sills, fine furniture, crossties, and fuel wood. The Native Americans used pulp from the wood to combat fever and headaches, and the seeds were roasted for food and served as a substitute for coffee (a very bitter coffee, but it was probably better than nothing).

A particularly interesting characteristic of the Kentucky coffeetree is that yes, it is in the legume family, but it is NOT a nitrogen fixer, like its black locust or honeylocust cousins. It has very few pests and is being pushed in the landscape industry as a substitute for ash or elm. It is a tough urban tree and has been successfully used on surface mining reclamation sites. Consider planting Kentucky coffeetree on your property, you will be rewarded with a tree with a low-maintenance, four-season appeal.

The alternate, bipinnately compound leaves of the Kentucky coffeetree are the largest of any native tree species. Kentucky coffeetrees do not have leaves on their branches for half the year.



At one point in time, people used to roast the seeds of Kentucky coffeetree to make a bitter type of coffee.



This champion Kentucky coffeetree can be found in Prospect (the city crosses the Jefferson/Oldham county line). The Kentucky coffeetree is Kentucky's State Heritage Tree.

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