



Kentucky Big Tree Program
Outstanding in
the Field -
Literally!
The National and
State Champion
Chinkapin Oak



Chinkapin oak leaf
Photo courtesy: Wimbish Tree Farms,
www.wimbishtreefarm.com

by *Diana Olszowy*

This new national and state champion Chinkapin oak is a long-term resident of a large, well-preserved remnant of Bluegrass-savanna-woodland located smack-dab in the middle of Kentucky's Inner Bluegrass region. The tree resides on the 746-acre Griffith Woods research farm in Harrison County which is managed cooperatively by the University of Kentucky, The Nature Conservancy and the Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission.

When one describes the Bluegrass Region of Kentucky to a non-resident, they mention the vast expanses of rolling hills carpeted with grasses and wildflowers and presided over by majestic old trees like bur and Shumard oaks, blue and white ashes, hickories, hackberries and Kentucky coffeetree. Large, open-grown trees, referred to in forestry terms as "wolf" trees, are scattered across the region. Without any competition from nearby neighbors, these trees take full advantage of their growing conditions and reach for the sky, vertically and horizontally. The new Chinkapin oak champion is no exception - while only 76 feet tall and 69 feet in spread; the tree's circumference is a whopping 311 inches, that's nearly 26 feet around!

Chinkapin oak, also called yellow oak, yellow chestnut oak and rock oak and is sometimes spelled "chinquapin," is generally believed to be derived from "chinkomen," an Algonquin term for chestnut. Chinkapin oaks are very adaptable to many soil and pH conditions. They are a tough species and can be found naturally in dry, upland soils and are very

tolerant of heat and drought; making them an excellent urban tree as well.

Chinkapin oaks are considered a medium to large-size tree; averaging 50 – 70 feet in height and 50 – 60 feet in spread. They are a common resident in much of Kentucky and extend north into New England, west to Minnesota, and south to Texas and southeast to northern Florida. Historically through its range, early pioneers used Chinkapin oak wood to make thousands of miles of fences in the states of Ohio, Kentucky and Indiana. Later on, the trees were used to fuel the steamships that ran from Pittsburgh to New Orleans and were also used as railroad ties for the new railroads that crisscrossed the Midwest.

This tree has witnessed centuries of change and has lived to tell its tale. It provided blissful shade and a plentiful bounty of acorns for bison and elk in its youth; later cattle and horses reaped its benefits and who knows, maybe someday bison and elk will return to this tree outstanding in the field.

About the Author:

Diana Olszowy is Stewardship and Education Branch Manager with the Kentucky Division of Forestry. She is also an editor of the *Kentucky Woodlands Magazine*.

Kentucky Division of Forestry, 627 Comanche Trail, Frankfort, KY 40601; E-mail: diana.olszowy@ky.gov; Phone: 502.564.4496; Fax: 502.564.6553.