

Kentucky Big Tree Program

The Little Oak That Could

...and Did!

by Diana Olszowy

S ometime in the 16th century, a bur oak acorn sprouted in a shallow hollow on the rolling savannah of what is now called the Bluegrass region of central Kentucky. By the time the Mayflower sailed, the young bur oak had grown large enough that it was no longer threatened with trampling by the huge bison herds. Today that tree is the biggest bur oak in the country, the pride of Bourbon County, and a survivor of well over 400 years.

This national champion bur oak—with its crown of 102 feet and its huge girth of 24 feet—is a living connection to the mostly lost and forgotten Bluegrass Plain savannah, a relic plant community produced by the last Ice Age and maintained by browsing deer, elk, and the thundering hooves of great bison herds. In its youth, bison still thrived, their sheer number creating “buffalo traces” through the canebrakes and meadows that roads would later follow. Elk, gray wolf,

black bear, river otter, and whitetail deer thrived, and passenger pigeons darkened the sky with flocks numbered in the billions. Most of the wildlife we see today was far more abundant back then.

Bur oak is a very adaptable species, growing well in a range of sites, from dry uplands on limestone and gravelly ridges to moist flood plains. It is fire-resistant due to its very thick bark and is much preferred by landscap-

ers due to its ability to thrive in clay soils. Bur oak is easily identified by the large, “mossycup” fringed acorn and by the rough, deeply furrowed, vertical ridged bark. Commercially, bur oak wood is used for cabinetry, flooring, barrels, and fenceposts. And its acorns are at the top of the food preference list for wood ducks, wild turkeys, whitetail deer, rabbits, mice, squirrels, and other rodents.

Next time you see a bur oak with its massive, majestic form standing alone in a field with limbs spreading out 80 to 100 feet in all directions, think about the stories it could tell!

In Search of a Champion Tree...

Next time you get a chance, check out your local graveyard or behind that old dilapidated house down the road or the back 40 acres on your grandfather’s farm. Kentucky’s next state champion tree could be there, waiting to be discovered. The Division of Forestry administers the state’s champion tree program and 97 tree species currently have champions.



Above: National champion bur oak.
Right: A bur oak acorn is known by its fringed cap.
Photos courtesy: Kentucky Division of Forestry



However, we are still looking for a few tree species which have no champs:

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|----------------|-----------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| Virginia pine | Common hop-tree | Bigleaf magnolia | Rock elm |
| Canadian yew | Deciduous holly | Chokecherry | American hornbeam |
| Mountain maple | Ohio buckeye | Mountain camellia | Alleghany chinquapin |
| Swamp privet | Black maple | Sourwood | Butternut |
| Staghorn sumac | Water hickory | Water elm | Carolina buckthorn |

To qualify to be a champion in this program, these nominees must be a woody plant with a “tree form” not shrub form, which means they must have a single perennial trunk, be at least 10 feet tall and three inches in diameter. Some of these tree species are fairly common throughout the state, others are region-specific (i.e. mountain maple in eastern Kentucky and swamp privet in western Kentucky, etc.). When submitting a nominee in for champion tree consideration, the following information must be included to be considered: Circumference measurement (in inches) at 4.5 feet up the trunk from the ground; height of the tree (in feet); average crown spread (widest + narrowest)/2 (in feet); digital photos of the tree; and GPS coordinates of the tree’s location.

If you are unsure of the species or unable to provide all needed information, please contact your local division of forestry district office for assistance. Happy hunting!

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Kentucky’s National Champion Trees

Below is a list of Kentucky’s national champion trees. For a complete listing of Kentucky’s champion trees, visit www.forestry.ky.gov/programs/kybigtree

Tree Species	County	Circumference (in.)	Height (ft.)	Crown Spread (ft.)	Index
Ash, blue	Mason	154.6	120	132	307.6
Elm, American	Lee	229	127	104	382
Hickory, shellbark	Greenup	171	141	78	331.5
Oak, bur	Bourbon	284	73	102	382.5
Oak, pin	Bell	240	134	88	396
Oak, shingle	Jefferson	170	122	83	312.75
Oak, Shumard	Powell	286	120	97.5	430.38
Sassafras	Daviess	270.5	77	67	364.25
Sweetgum	Fulton	152	130	78	301.5
Sycamore, American	Montgomery	440	85	68	542
Yellowwood, American	Jefferson	214	73.00	67	303.75