

Kentucky Coffeetree

gymnocladus dioica

The Kentucky coffee tree is a tree in the subfamily of Caesalpinioideae of the pea family, native to the Midwest and Upper South of North America.

The Kentucky coffee tree is considered a rare tree species. The tree's native range is limited, occurring from Southern Ontario, Canada and the United States from Kentucky (where it was first found by Europeans) and western Pennsylvania in the east, to Kansas, eastern Nebraska and southeastern South Dakota in the west, to southern Wisconsin and Michigan in the north, and to northern Louisiana in the south. It's planted as an urban shade tree across the United States and eastern Canada, including California.

The tree varies from 60 to 70 feet high with a spread of 40 to 50 feet and the trunk up to 3 feet in diameter. The tree grows at a medium rate with height increases of anywhere from 12 inches to 24 inches per year.

The Kentucky coffee tree is a moderately fast-growing tree. Male trees are often grown in parks and along city streets for ornamental purposes. The tree is fairly short-lived, healthy trees living from 100 to 150 years. The tree sheds its leaves early during the fall and appears bare for up to 6 months. The naked appearance of the tree is reflected through the Kentucky coffee tree's Greek genus name, which means "naked branch". The bark is ash-gray and scaly, flaking similarly to black cherry.

It is often planted because of its unique appearance and interesting character. There are several Kentucky coffee trees at Mount Vernon, in the gardens along the path leading up to the house of George Washington. From 1976 to 1994, the Kentucky coffee tree was the state tree of Kentucky.

The Kentucky coffee tree is a tree in the subfamily of Caesalpinioideae of the pea family, native to the Midwest and Upper South of North America. The seed may be roasted and used as a substitute for coffee beans, however, unroasted pods and seeds are toxic. The beans of the tree were eaten, after roasting, by the Meskwaki (Fox), Ho-Chunk (Winnegago) and Pawnee Native American cultures. The Meskwaki also drank the roasted ground seeds in a hot beverage similar to coffee.

In addition to use as a food, the seeds of the Kentucky coffee tree were used by Native Americans for ceremonial and recreational purposes. Seeds were used as dice in "games of chance" that were common in eastern tribes. The seeds were also used in jewelry. Pioneers used its seeds for roasting coffee and the wood for making fence posts. The wood is also used both by cabinetmakers and carpenters. It has very little sapwood.

You can find the Kentucky coffee tree at the Salt Lake City Cemetery at the intersection of 405 North and 1100 East looking toward the North.

