

Kentucky Coffee Tree

Gymnocladus dioicus

The Kentucky Coffee Tree is a medium sized tree that will reach a height of 70 feet while spreading 45-60 feet. The state tree of Kentucky could be used much more in landscape environments due to its adaptability to many soil types, it has very interesting bark, and grows with an open canopy allowing light to penetrate to the ground sufficient for turf growth. The coarse branch texture and interesting bark provide an unique winter specimen. A member of the legume family, large seed pods hang on the tree through winter. The seeds within these pods are very hard, even pebble-like. The leaves, seeds, and pod-pulp are all poisonous to cattle, horses, and humans. This is thought to be an evolutionary vestige to favor their favored seed dispersal agent, the mastadon. The tree remains stark in the landscape until late spring; one of the last trees to bloom and set leaves.



Identification

Leaves

Deciduous, alternate bipinnately compound. Leaflet elliptical, green in summer and yellow in autumn. Each leaflet less than 2".



Bark/Wood

Grayish-brown, rough with hard, thin film, and scaly ridges.



Flower/Fruit

Dioecious; white inconspicuous flower in spring. Elongated 6-12 inch pods containing very hard 1/2" bean like seeds. Pods persist on trees.



Form

Trunk normally grows straight up and very strong. Branches grow at wide angles and well spaced. Crown is round or oval, relatively open.



Uses

Can be used as reclamation tree, shade tree, specimen, and residential tree. No known commercial use for its wood or fruit.

Ethnobotany

The very hard seeds were once ground and used as a coffee substitute by early settlers.

Native Distribution

Ohio River Valley south to the Gulf States.

Establishment

Tolerates all but the most water logged of soils. Tolerates alkalinity, but not soil salt.

Growing Conditions and Culture

Mature Size 70'Hx60'Wx3'dbh
 USDA Zone 3-8
 Light Requirements Full Sun

Soils Diverse
 Drought Tolerant? Yes
 Inundation Tolerant? No

Pests/Damaging Agents

No pests or diseases of major concern.

Similar Species

Propagation

Seed - hard coat must be abraded or soaked in acid. Cold stratify 30-45 days.

Source(s)

Collected as seed from Cornell Plantation, NY.