

Kentucky coffeetree (*Gymnocladus dioica*)

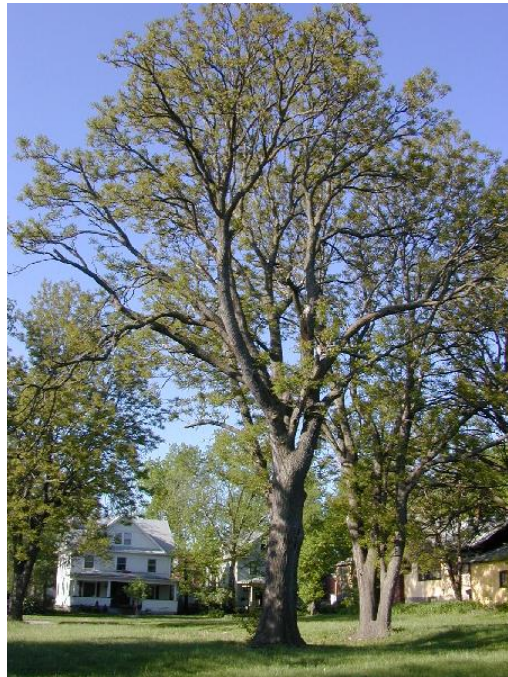
Nebraska Forest Service

One of the more unusual trees that occur in Nebraska is the Kentucky coffeetree (*Gymnocladus dioica*). Some books will tell you it is a medium sized tree but in this part of the country medium and large trees tend to blend together. Kentucky coffeetree is native from Lake Erie to Oklahoma and includes Kentucky on the southeastern side and Minnesota on the northwest. To no one's surprise it is the state tree of Kentucky.

According to information from the University of Kentucky the earliest known use of the name "coffeetree" is found in one of George Washington's diaries from the late 1700s. He was given some seed of this species for planting at Mount Vernon. The common name coffeetree came about because Native Americans and early settlers in Kentucky

brewed a hot beverage from its roasted seeds. It has also been said that the seeds were used for buttons on shirts in those early days. Early land developers promoted the term Kentucky coffeetree in order to encourage settlers to come to the "far west" (which included Kentucky at that time). Coffee, a popular beverage, was expensive and hard to find away from coastal ports. Land developers advertised Kentucky as a place where a tree grew with beans that could be roasted and brewed to make a fine coffee substitute. Although drinkable, the beverage was no substitute for coffee, and the early settlers quickly dropped it as soon as the real thing became available.

The National Champion is not in Kentucky but rather in Ohio and is 202 inches in circumference, 92 feet tall, and has a spread of 77 feet. That's no small tree.



Kentucky coffeetree has excellent fall color, golden yellow to orange. The winter silhouette is very attractive and unique. The leaves are twice compound and quite large creating an almost a tropical appearance. If there is any down side for the tree it is that the seeds are formed in large pods that can be a nuisance when they fall.

When the pods open they reveal a bean like seed that is as hard as a rock and

about ½ inch to ¾ inch in diameter. The beans can be dried and polished in similar fashion to the Ohio buckeye. The tree is dioecious and so the seeds form only on the female tree.

The genus name, *Gymnocladus*, means "naked branch" in Greek and refers to the network of coarse branches that typically can be seen without foliage or smaller twigs for about six months of each year. The species tolerates drought, alkaline soils, pollution, deicing salt, heat and reflected light, making it a truly tough and resilient, and therefore highly desirable, landscape and forest tree. It has very few, if any, serious insect or disease enemies.

Seedlings and young transplants often look gangly and thus are not often picked from the nursery as nice trees. But don't be fooled. While the tree may look a little rough in its early years, it will blossom into a beautiful shade tree and one that will be a real conversation piece.