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**Tree of the Month – October 2022**  
**Kentucky Coffee Tree**

**Common Name:** Kentucky Coffee Tree

**Botanical Name:** *Gymnocladus dioica*

**Native Range:** Northeastern and Central United States USDA Hardiness Zones 3 to 8

**Height:** Can reach a height of 90 feet. More often 60 feet in the urban environment

**Spread:** 40 to 50 feet. More often 35 feet in the urban environment

**Form:** Upright arching branches develop into an ornamental oval crown at maturity

**Growth Rate:** Slow to moderate growth rate. Male trees grow faster and are more frequently used as parks and street trees.

**Sun:** Full sun

**Soil:** Very adaptable tree. Tolerates drought conditions, wet conditions, low pH, high pH. Prefers rich moist soils.

**Leaf Description:** Very large bipinnately, alternate, compound 3' leaves with numerous 2" leaflets. Leaves are pink-bronze when they emerge turning to dark green in summer. Leaves are tropical in appearance

**Fall Color:** Yellow

**Flower Description:** Female flowers are 8 to 12 inches long, greenish white in color appearing in early summer and are fragrant. Male flowers are about half the size of female flowers.

**Fruit:** Female tree have panicle pods which can be 8 to 10 inches long containing a poisonous fruit which can be neutralized by roasting.

**Bark Description:** The bark is ash-gray and scaly

**Wildlife Benefit:** Nesting for birds

**Tolerates:** Urban conditions, pollution, clay soil, wet soil, drought, high pH, low pH

**Possible Disease and Insect Problems:** None serious

**Uses:**

- Street or boulevard tree for tough locations
- Shade tree for parks, campuses, and residential environments

**Where to be found on municipal property:** There is a specimen Coffee Tree in Marquand Park in the eastern lawn area, a group of mature specimens are located at the cross street of Riverside Drive and Longview Drive, there are also a group of Coffee Trees located in the island at the Wawa adjacent to the train station. There is a healthy female Kentucky Coffee tree next to Kopp's Cycles surrounded by concrete and a compacted parking lot.

**Additional Facts:**

- Famous horticulturist Michael Dirr describes the Coffee Tree tree as an excellent street tree with a growth habit that provides clearance and one that has an elegant branching structure that becomes better each year.
  - “A tree that should be used more, a structure that feels massive like an ancient cathedral, yet its foliage is as elegant as a stained glass window.”
- The male fruitless cultivar ‘Espresso’ is a tree selected to be planted throughout Witherspoon Street.
- Got its name common name from the seeds pods which were roasted to be used as a coffee substitute by early settlers in Kentucky.
- Well suited for urban environments
- Growth appears unaffected by drought and road salt
- The seeds were used for ceremonial and recreational purposes by Native Americans
- Leaves are later to emerge in spring
- In earlier times, the wood was used to make railway sleeper cars
- Several specimen trees planted at Mt. Vernon
- State tree of Kentucky until 1976









## References

Dirr, Michael A., Manual of Woody Landscape Plants, Their Identification, Ornamental Characteristics, Culture, Propagation and Uses, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition, Stipes Publishing L.L.C., 1998.

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