

Kentucky Coffeetree

By: Pam Bergstrom, Lower Elkhorn Natural Resources District Forester

Looking for a reliable tree for your yard that is native, can handle the harsh climate of Nebraska, and will be appealing to look at? How about the Kentucky Coffeetree? Don't let the name fool you; the Kentucky Coffeetree is a native tree that was and still is found along the rivers and creeks of eastern Nebraska. Today, we are planting this native in our windbreaks and also reestablishing them along our rivers and creek. You will also find specimens in our parks and arboretums. If you want to take a look at a Kentucky Coffeetree before you consider buying one for your yard, head over to Maskenthine Lake Arboretum just north of Stanton, Sky View Lake Arboretum in Norfolk, Barnes Park Arboretum in Madison, or Gilman Park Arboretum in Pierce. All four of these arboretums have at least one planted.

This nitrogen fixer will tolerate wet and dry conditions along with pollution and salt that is used for de-icing. Growing to a height of over 60 feet and a crown spread of over 40 feet, make sure you have plenty of room to grow and needs to be planted in an area with full sunshine. Did I mention that the lifespan can reach 100 – 200 years of age? Also, it has no serious disease or pest problems and can tolerate poor soils but not heavy clays. It can sucker at the base, but this can be taken care of by pruning off the suckers in the spring.

You will find male trees and female trees. In parks, the male trees are sought after because they do not produce the pods that hold the seeds. The female trees will produce a greenish-white flower in the spring that has a fragrance that is rose like. If you are looking for a male tree, think about the following male cultivars: Espresso, Prairie Titan, or Stately Manor. Although, the seed pods of the female will hold on during the winter and provide some interest to the otherwise barren landscape.

What about fall color? If you are looking for a bright red fall color, this isn't your tree. The fall color is more of a dark yellow with some flakes of orange coming through. In the fall, you will find that

the Kentucky Coffeetree is one of the first trees to drop its leaves and when it comes to the spring, it is one of the last trees to put out its leaves so don't panic if you don't see leaves until late April/early May.

It gets its name Kentucky Coffeetree because early settlers to Kentucky noticed the resemblance of the seeds that grow in kidney shaped pods to the coffee bean. Later on pioneers and infantry men would boil/roast the seeds in water and come up with a coffee like substance. Now, the coffee that comes from the seeds is not worthy of Starbucks, but in a pinch will give you the coffee buzz you need to start your morning.

A word of caution that if you don't boil/roast the beans/seeds, they are toxic and should not be consumed. Some wildlife is able to consume the seeds raw and have no side effects or become poisoned. Another word of caution is that the seed pulp and leaves are toxic to livestock so don't plant near livestock facilities that will be utilized during the fall or winter when the seed pods fall.

You may be wondering why I am talking about a tree that is toxic to humans and livestock. This sturdy native deserves a chance to defend itself and with male cultivars available it is a good choice and it should be pointed out that you have to ingest quite a bit of the seeds before they become toxic. The saying goes; 'the right tree in the right place' and I believe Kentucky Coffeetree has a right place along right of ways in communities where salt is utilized during the winter or in a backyard where it can provide shade for a home. I have seen it do wonderfully in windbreaks around homesteads out in the country and I have seen it thrive in town where air pollution and the residue of salt from winter have killed other trees. Now, I will agree that this isn't the tree for around a daycare or close to livestock, but there are plenty of other sites where this tree will do just fine and won't cause problems.



