

Kentucky coffee tree (*Gymnocladus dioicus*)

Family: Pea (Fabaceae)

DESCRIPTION: A species native to Minnesota’s Mississippi, St. Croix and Minnesota river floodplains, Kentucky coffee tree can grow up to 75 feet tall, and is a popular replacement for ash and elm boulevard trees. A member of the pea family, its female trees produce pods with a hard, poisonous coating.

USES: Its ability to withstand salt exposure, temperature extremes, and a wide range of soil types and nutrient levels makes the species a good choice for stormwater tree trenches, yards, parks and boulevards. Flowers are pollinated by bumblebees, long-horned bees, hummingbirds, butterflies and beetles. The seeds are poisonous when eaten raw but historically the nuts have been roasted and eaten, or roasted, pulverized and then brewed like coffee.

REFERENCES:

[Minnesota Wildflowers](#)

Minnesota Trees; David M. Rathke, University of Minnesota Extension Service, 1995

[University of Minnesota](#)



Range Map Credit: USDA Plants Database



Photo Credit: ChueKongPheng Xiong

Planting Recommendations

While Kentucky coffee tree prefers full to partial sun, and moist, fertile soils, it will tolerate partial shade and drought. It is commonly available in pots or as bare-root plants. When planting from containers, keep the tree from becoming root-bound by loosening and redirecting the roots. When planting bare-root stock, soak the roots for three to six hours, and dig

a hole large enough to accommodate the taproot and lateral roots. Trees also can be started from seed in spring or fall. This method requires first cracking seeds’ sturdy coating. One method: soak the seeds in a weak acid for several hours to allow water to reach the seed and promote germination. Or use a file to weaken the seed coat, and then soak for 24 hours. Plant 1 to 2 inches deep.

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STATEWIDE WETLAND INDICATOR STATUS: None

ID: The deciduous tree has bipinnately — twice-divided — compound leaves. The leaves are 1 to 3 feet long, each with 40 or more leaflets. There is no leaflet at the tip of the leaf. Leaflets are 2 to 2½ inches long and up to 1½ inches wide. The brownish gray bark has vertical scaly plates that curve outward.

SIMILAR SPECIES:

Black locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) has paired spines on each bud. Its leaves are pinnately compound, with seven to 19 leaflets on a leaf and a leaflet at the tip of the leaf. Honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) produces slimmer, longer pods, and leaflets that are about half the length.