

## The Ginkgo Tree

*Published 8/19/19 – image of ginkgo branches in the fall from free photos at Needpix.com*

Back in June I wrote about the northern catalpa as one of my favorite trees. The ginkgo is another of my top favorites but for several different reasons than the catalpa. Literally there is no other tree like the ginkgo.

The ginkgo is a living fossil, they can be dated back to 270 million years ago to the early Jurassic. The current species, *ginkgo biloba*, and other species in the genus were once widespread throughout the globe but by 2 million years ago were restricted to two small areas in China. Genetic analysis of one of these areas suggests that they were possibly planted and cared for by Chinese monks over the span of 1,000 years. Thought to be extinct in the wild, they were rediscovered in China in 1691 and brought to this continent in the late 1700's.

Ginkgos are dioecious meaning there are separate male and female trees. Only the female trees produce seeds which have very unpleasant smelling coatings sometimes described as rancid butter or human vomit. This has given the entire species a bad name and unfortunately to this day uneducated authors write articles about not planting ginkgos because of the unpleasant smell. However reputable garden centers only offer male trees which do not produce seeds and hence do not produce the unpleasant smell.



Ginkgos need 4 hours or more of sun each day, tolerate a wide range of soil and environmental conditions, and may be slow to grow when first planted but can grow 1-2' per year reaching 50' tall at maturity although there are dwarf varieties that will top out at 3-4' tall. Young trees are tall, slender and sparsely branched, becoming broader as they age forming pleasing pyramidal canopies. They can be planted as shade or ornamental trees and are very useful as street and boulevard trees. Extremely long lived (some living specimens are over 3,000 years old), ginkgos have distinctive fan-shaped leaves and provide a beautiful yellow color in the fall.

In the wild ginkgos are typically found in slightly acidic soils but they also grow in alkaline soil and tolerate moderate drought and moist conditions but may suffer during extended hot, dry periods. To say ginkgos are tough is an understatement. In Hiroshima Japan, six ginkgos that were about a mile from the 1945 atomic bomb blast were among the few plants and animals that survived the blast. They were charred but soon regained vigor and are still living today as venerated survivors of that day.

In our area ginkgos are under planted, probably because of the misinformation about their smell and a belief that they are slow growing, which they are not. With their symmetrical growth habit, beautiful fall colors, unique leaf shapes, and ability to withstand extremes these trees are well suited for our environment. There is a ginkgo on the Capital grounds close to the Fighting Stallions Statue; there is another on the east side of Harrison between Broadway and Cabot.

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