

Mother Nature can play tricks on you. I know. The other day I fleetingly fell victim to the old saying, “Things are not always what they seem.”

It happened around dusk. While Rita and I were riding in our car, I noticed what I thought to be an alarming sight. Contrasting against the dusky sky, I saw the silhouette of a large, coarsely-branched tree which I thought was inhabited by hundreds of bats hanging high in its branches. As we approached the tree, I quickly realized I had been temporarily deceived. What appeared to be bats was nothing more than hundreds of large seed pods hanging from the tree’s branches. It truly was an eerie spectacle.

Witnessing such a vista immediately initiated a discussion between Rita and me. Although she thought I had gone batty, we did agree this species of tree was very interesting. It was then I decided to write about it.

The imaginary, disturbing view I witnessed that day was that of *Gymnocladus dioicus*, more commonly known as the Kentucky coffee tree. Ironically, the genus name, *Gymnocladus*, means "naked branch" in Greek. A mature tree is comprised of a network of coarse branches with few small twigs, creating a striking image that can be easily seen in the absence of foliage. Furthermore, the large seed pods that occur on female trees persist throughout the winter adding to their visibility. The fact is, this tree creates an uncanny appearance during the winter months.

Supposedly, Kentucky coffee tree got its common name because early settlers in Kentucky brewed a hot beverage from its roasted seeds. The tree is indigenous to Nebraska and is found naturally growing along river bottoms in the eastern part of the state. However, when planted by humans, Kentucky coffee tree performs well throughout most of the state. The tree is dioecious, a term which means either the tree is male or female.

The Kentucky coffee tree is capable of reaching mature heights of 75 to 100 feet; thus, it is frequently found growing in public parks as a large shade tree. It is remarkably free of serious insect or disease problems and tolerates a wide range

of conditions such as drought, alkaline soils and the many hardships trees face trying to survive in an urban setting.

Kentucky coffee tree belongs to the family *Leguminosae*, the pea family. Like all legumes, it produces bean-like seed pods. The pods are five to ten inches in length and usually one to two inches broad. Each pod contains four to eight seeds each about the size of a quarter.

Kentucky coffee tree has very large, compound leaves described as alternate, bi-pinnately. Each leaf is comprised of many leaflets. A single leaf can reach a length of thirty-six inches and a width of twenty-four inches. The large leaves create an almost tropical appearance. Because of its unusual winter silhouette, Kentucky coffee tree is often planted as an ornamental.

Male trees are recommended for planting since they do not produce seed pods that may litter the lawn and/or streets. Several cultivars are available in the nursery trade, particularly those that are predominately male. *Espresso*, *J.C McDaniel* and *Stately Manor* are male trees. They flower but produce no fruit.

It's obvious to me now; the tree I noticed the other day was a female Kentucky coffee tree. What I thought to be bats hanging in its branches turned out to be nothing more than seed pods. I've attached a photo of this tree to see if your imagination plays tricks on you. If not, then it's probably safe to say, that I've truly gone batty — something Rita has known about me for a long time. 😊

