

**Yard and Garden –03-12-2011 – Ted Griess/ Extension Horticulture Assistant**

Look, up in the tree! Are they birds? Are they bats? No, they are beans — coffee beans.

At this very moment you are probably saying, “Not another coffee story!” My reply is yes, but this coffee story takes a different twist.

Last Saturday Rita and I took an early morning walk. As we passed the arboretum on the Jensen Memorial Library grounds, we both noticed a curious sight. The sun had eerily illuminated a multitude of unrecognizable dark objects scattered throughout the boughs of a particular tree. At first glance, they appeared to be birds. Then, based on how these oddities were hanging within the tree, I thought for a brief moment they could be bats.



As we approached the tree, I finally recognized them as coffee beans. No, not the coffee beans from which that marvelous beverage that I like so well is made, but rather, they were the bean pods of a Kentucky coffeetree.

Hmm, Kentucky coffeetree. What an odd name to give a tree. I wondered how it received its name.



The scientific name for Kentucky coffeetree is *Gymnocladus dioicus*. Native to North America, it is the only member of the genus *Gymnocladus*, a word originating from the Greek language and meaning naked branch. As one can see from the photo, the branches of the Kentucky coffeetree are few and stout. *Dioicus*, also from Greek, relates to the word dioecious, meaning separate male and female trees.

Kentucky coffeetree is a slow-growing tree, hardy in Zones 4 through 8. It prefers moist soil but is extremely tolerant of drought conditions and performs well in high pH soils. At maturity, this tree is capable of reaching heights of 80 to 100 feet. Furthermore, Kentucky coffeetree has no significant disease or pest problems. These qualities make this tree nearly perfect for growing in central Nebraska.



The leaves of the Kentucky coffeetree are unique. Kentucky coffeetree has the largest leaf of any deciduous tree found in North America. A mature leaf can easily reach three feet in length. The leaves are bipinnately compound and

composed of many leaflets. The leaflets are attached alternately to a stem-like structure called a rachilla. Several rachillas are attached in opposite fashion to a central stem called the rachis. In autumn, the entire compound leaf detaches at the point where the rachis joins the branch, thus leaving a huge leaf scar.

During winter, the Kentucky coffeetree appears course. Dormancy lasts nearly six months, and the Kentucky coffeetree is one of the last to sprout new leaves in spring. The tree blooms in late May to early June. Flowers are present on both male and female trees. The flowers are somewhat inconspicuous being a whitish green in color. Although flowers appear on both male and female trees, only the female trees bear fruit. The mature fruit is a flat, thick, leathery, dark-brown seedpod four to six inches in length. Inside the pod are four to eight almost black seeds. These seedpods remain attached to the tree throughout the winter months. Hopefully that explains the illusion of what I thought first to be birds, then bats, and finally seedpods.



As nearly perfect as this tree is to grow in Nebraska, it has some drawbacks. Kentucky coffeetree can be quite messy as it drops leaflets, leaves, seedpods, rachilla and rachis at various times of the year.

Secondly, I read in a publication by the USDA that certain Native American tribes made a tea from the wood pulp and leaves of the Kentucky coffeetree to treat a number of maladies. Early settlers used the beans (seeds) as a substitute for coffee. Interestingly, I also read in the same publication that the seeds and pods of the Kentucky coffeetree are extremely poisonous to humans and livestock. They are only safe to eat when cooked properly. I wouldn't recommend it.

Perhaps, it was a **very lucky** early settler from Kentucky who, after discovering this feature, lived to tell about it; thus the name Kentucky coffeetree.