

Name That Tree

By Gil Medeiros

If you selected *Ginkgo biloba*, you are correct (give yourself a gold star). The fan-shaped, lobed leaves, 2–3 inches long, are the best identification key.

Ginkgo is a gymnosperm, more closely related to conifers such as pine trees than other deciduous trees. It is also the only species in its genus, which is the only genus in its family.

It will grow at a moderate rate to 50 to 75 feet tall and spread to about 35 feet.

Our region is in the “Goldilocks zone” for this tree: “Not too hot, not too cold; just right.”

Ginkgo is an all-around athlete in that it can thrive in soils that are acidic, alkaline, compressed, or loose — that’s one reason it succeeds as a street tree. The limbs resist breakage in the wind. It is also a respectable shade tree when mature. You are not likely to outlive this tree; it can live 1,000 years.

There are numerous cultivars available, even a dwarf version that grows to a maximum of 6 feet. This makes a great focal point shrub in the back of a bed. The cultivars offer variations of tree form from columnar to vase-shaped.



photo: NC State University

Yellow Autumn Leaves



photo: Bob Polomsky, Clemson University

Bob Polomsky © 2014, Clemson University

Female *Ginkgo biloba* with fruit

Years ago Ginkgo acquired a bad reputation; there was a smell problem. Ginkgo sets male flowers on some trees and female flowers on the others, but never male and female flowers on the same tree. (Botany vocabulary alert: this kind of plant is said to be “dioecious” – pronounced di –eesh –us. I dare you to use this one at a cocktail party.) After pollination the female trees set small plumlike fruit with fleshy exteriors and a hard seed inside. The fruit fall to the ground where they produce an awful stink. Nearby, people were not happy. Sales of Ginkgo trees suffered because trees grown from seed could be either male or female. The sex could not be identified until the tree was mature. It was too late to do anything about it, except consider the chainsaw option.

Then the tree farms started to propagate the trees

vegetatively, using only grafts from male trees. This technique always produces male trees. If you buy a Ginkgo in a nursery, make sure you are getting a male tree unless you are interested in harvesting the fruit.

The seeds are edible after the outer fleshy part has been removed and the seeds are roasted. This is a delicacy in Asia.

Ginkgo biloba also refers to an extract of the leaves, which is used to treat a wide range of maladies. There is evidence it is effective in treatment of Alzheimer’s disease, macular degeneration, schizophrenia and others.

References

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