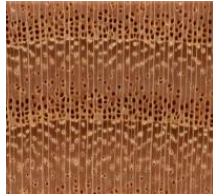


Wood of The Month

Kentucky Coffeetree – *Gymnocladus dioicus*



Kentucky Coffeetree, also known by the many names; American coffee bean, American mahogany, chicot, chico du Canada, Chicot tree, coffeebean, coffeebean-tree, coffeenut, coffeetree, dead tree, geweihbaum, Kentucky mahogany, mahogany, mahogany-bean, nettle-tree, nicker-tree, and stump tree grows from central New York and southern Ontario west to southern Michigan, Minnesota and South Dakota south to central Kansas, southern Oklahoma east to Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia and Pennsylvania. It gets its name from the fact of early settlers (particularly in Kentucky) used roasted seeds from this tree to make a coffee substitute. However, the seeds (and leaves) are toxic if not prepared correctly. The Native Americans used the pulp from the pod to treat “lunacy.” Leaf and pulp tea were used for reflex troubles and as a laxative. The tree is late to leaf out and bloom and is the first to lose its leaves in the fall causing it to be dormant for about 6 months of the year, leading to the name Dead Tree or Stump Tree.

The wood of Kentucky coffeetree is ring porous, resembling ash, honeylocust or sassafras. Its sapwood is narrow and yellowish white, while the heartwood is light red to reddish brown. The wood has no characteristic odor or taste. It is hard and heavy, with a coarse, straight grain. The overall appearance and grain pattern is similar to ash or oak yet has very similar coloring as honey locust which it is very often confused with and is difficult to identify from. The best indicator is the clustered latewood pores that are unique to Coffeetree. The wood has good to excellent working characteristics and glues, stains, and finishes well. It will turn to a light chocolate brown over time. It must be dried carefully due to the tendency to split. It has been used for posts, furniture, railroad ties, fuel, cabinetmaking, interior finish and construction.

Kentucky coffeetree’s numbers are declining due to over harvesting. Due to the hard outer shell of the seeds, it germinates with difficulty. Because of the toxicity of the seeds, squirrels and other wildlife do not eat or cache them, therefore they do not get spread except for trees close to streams that carry them downstream. It is a wonderful shade tree however is messy from the twigs and seed pods.

You can read more about Kentucky Coffeetree at: [Coffeetree on the Wood-database](#) and [Kentucky Coffeetree on Wikipedia.org](#) or at [the USDA plants database](#).

Written by – Mel Bryan