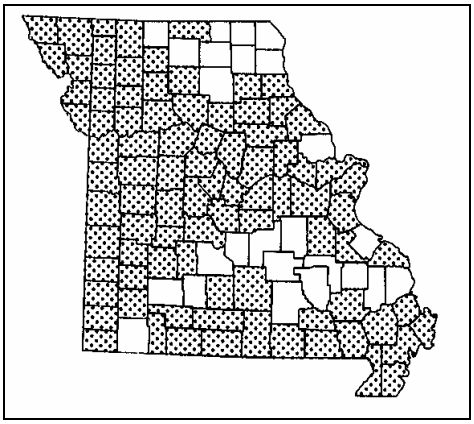
Kentucky Coffeetree

Gymnocladus dioicus (L.) K. Koch

Coffeetree, bean tree or coffeebean, nickertree or coffeenut tree grows throughout the state, although it is a scattered species, never in pure stands. It grows best on rich bottomland or in coves with deep moist soils. It may be associated with white oak, black walnut, basswood, red oak, elm and pawpaw. It is named for the fact that its hard round seeds were once ground, roasted and brewed into a substitute for coffee.

The sapwood is yellowish white to cream-colored, while the heartwood is rich light brown to light red, or pinkish or reddish brown. The bark is gray to dark gray, deeply fissured, scaly with scales attached along one side. The wood has no special odor or taste, is usually straight-grained and moderately heavy. It is ring porous with conspicuous growth rings. It may be confused with honeylocust, however, the large pores in the summerwood of coffeetree are readily visible with a hand lens and are arranged in clusters. In honeylocust, these pores are barely visible and are more solitary.

The wood is moderately hard, strong and coarse-grained. It makes beautiful paneling which weathers to a light chocolate brown. When dry, the wood is stable and machines well. It is also used for fence posts, crossties, rough construction and fuelwood. Occasionally, it will show considerable ring shake, but is an attractive wood for home workshops. Coffeetree lumber is available, but not common. The seed pod of coffeetree is short (4-6 inches), thick (½ inch), and wide (2 inches) compared to the long (6-12 inches), thin (⅛ inch), and narrow (1 ¼ inch) seed pod of honeylocust.



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