

Gymnocladus dioica

[Synonyms : *Guilandina dioica*, *Gymnocladus canadensis*, *Gymnocladus dioicus*]

KENTUCKY COFFEE TREE is a deciduous tree. Native to eastern and central North America it has greenish white flowers and leaves that turn yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as American coffee bean, American mahogany, Bonduc, Chicot tree, Coffee bean, Coffeenut, Coffee tree, Dead tree, Kentucky mahogany, Knicker tree, Mahogany, Mahogany bean, *Nahokvetec dvojdomy* (Slovak), *Nahovětvec dvoudomy* (Czech), *Napashakanak* (Winnebago North American Indian), *Natita* (Omaha and Ponca North American Indian), Nettle tree, Nicker tree, Stump tree, *Tohuts* (Pawnee North American Indian), and *Wahnahna* (Dakota North American Indian).

Warning – the fruit are poisonous (including the seeds) and can cause gastrointestinal disorders, vomiting, diarrhoea, heart irregularities, depression and coma.

Kentucky coffee tree has a similar appearance to the honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) and this tree's fruit have been eaten raw in error with unfortunate results.

Dioica refers to the male and female flowers growing on separate plants ie. dioecious.

Common names like Dead tree or Stump tree are hardly surprising when it is remembered that Kentucky coffee tree is dormant for about six months of the year.

The roasted seeds were eaten like chestnuts by the Pawnee and Meskwaki North American Indians, and they were also part of the diet of the Winnebago tribe. Meskwaki Indians also used the seeds to make a coffee.

Its seeds were used as a substitute for coffee by the early North American settlers as roasting destroys their poisonous qualities.

The fruit are alleged to have insecticidal properties that will kill flies.

The Dakota tribe have used the roots (in conjunction with other plants to make it effective) for a black dye.

One unusual use has been attributed to the Winnebago Indians. Apparently for them the seeds assumed the role of counters in gambling.

Some North American Indian tribes including the Omaha, Ponca, Winnebago, Dakota and Pawnee Indians used powdered root bark as a sneezing medium. This was not only used to cure headaches, but also as a stimulant to rouse a patient near to death. The tribes that adopted the latter practice believed that if this did not work after all other treatment had failed then nothing would be successful. The Omaha tribe also used various parts of the tree to treat kidney disorders and childbirth problems, and to enhance appetite. Many tribes including the Dakota, Omaha, Oto, Ponca and Winnebago, used the dried and powdered root bark to cure persistent constipation. This remedy was common long before Europeans set foot on the Continent and was administered with a syringe made from an animal bladder and a hollow, cylindrical bone.

Apart from today's commercial uses (fencing, railway sleepers and cabinetmaking) the wood has also been used for general construction, for building bridges and for finishing building interiors. It has also been burnt locally as fuel.

Kentucky coffee tree was once a state emblem for Kentucky in the United States but in 1994 this was superseded by tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera* – more familiar there probably as tulip poplar).

