

Sequoiadendron giganteum

[Synonyms : *Sequoia gigantea*, *Sequoia wellingtonia*, *Sequoiadendron washingtoniana*, *Sequoiadendron wellingtonia*, *Wellingtonia gigantea*]

GIANT SEQUOIA is an evergreen tree. Native to western North America (specifically the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada mountain range in California) it has scale-like leaves and dark brown cones.

It is also known as *Bergmammutbaum* (German), Big tree, Californian big tree, California redwood, *Gebirgs-Mammutbaum* (German), Giant redwood, Giant tree, Mammoth tree, *Mammutbaum* (German), Redwood, *Riesenmammutbaum* (German), *Sekvojovec mamutí* (Slovak), *Sekvojovec obrovský* (Czech), Sequoia, Sierra redwood, and Wellingtonia.

Giant sequoia is a protected species.

It has been confused with the Japanese red cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica*) but the latter has longer and curved leaves.

Giganteum means ‘gigantic, very or unusually large (or tall)’.

Some of the trees are thought to be 4000 years old and although they are claimed to be the largest living organism their weight of up to 2000 tons is accounted for primarily by ‘non-living’ wood.

Botanists discovered the giant sequoia in 1850 and it is believed to have been introduced to Europe in 1853. One story tells how a down-and-out Californian gold miner, one G.H. Woodruff, made a profit of \$1,030.60 from the sale of its seeds. According to legend squirrels feasting on the cones caused dislodged seeds to rain down upon him and harvesting these he sent them by pony express to a New York nursery (supposedly Ellwanger & Barry of Rochester). Of 4000 seedlings 400 were shipped to England where they were greeted with great enthusiasm. It seems that the Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani*) was losing its popularity in western Europe at the time and these seedlings were welcomed as a new fashion and sown both in botanical gardens and on large estates where many can still be seen today. (Of course none of those cultivated in Europe have as yet approached the great height of their Californian relatives.)

When the seedlings arrived in England (whatever year that was) amazingly in retrospect they came to be called *Wellingtonia* to honour the 1st Duke of Wellington (1769-1852) who had led the British to victory against Napoleon I (1769-1821) at the Battle of Waterloo on 18th June 1815. This catalysed some attempts to encourage preference for the name *Washingtonia* ie. in honour of George Washington (1732-1799) the 1st President of the United States, but these proved to be unsuccessful as the name had already been chosen for a genus of palm tree.

Two giant sequoias have been named after Civil War heroes, Grant (1822-1885) and Sherman (1820-1891). The ‘General Grant’ stands 292 ft. high and has a 41 ft. diameter immediately above ground level, while the ‘General Sherman’ found in 1897 by a trapper who served under the latter reaches 320 ft. Another tree no longer alive, which was christened ‘Father of the Forest’ and is believed to have been between 3,200 and 3,800 years old, reached a height of just over 410 ft. – the tallest evergreen tree ever to be measured.

Man's awareness (particularly that of the Europeans) of his relationship to the environment appears to have been negligible if not non-existent in recent centuries and authorities surmise that the giant sequoia presented an unavoidable challenge to fell. This view appears to gain support in some 19th Century Californian records of methods of felling that had been attempted. One of these involved five men boring holes in the tree's trunk (a task that was estimated to have taken a period of three weeks) before this incredible plant was eventually brought to its knees.

Like the redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) the giant sequoia too is an emblem of the state of California in the United States.

Although durable this very lightweight wood is soft and brittle and is only considered to be suitable for fencing or shingling today.