

Ginkgo Tree, Maidenhair Tree

Ginkgo biloba

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Maidenhair Tree (Ginkgo biloba)

If they ever were to truly create a "Jurassic Park," the Maidenhair tree would have to be planted there for sure. The Ginkgo, as it's also known, is the world's oldest living species of tree, the sole survivor of the Ginkgolaceae family whose fossil records date back to when dinosaurs roamed the earth. These trees can live a long time, some over 600 years, so you, your children, and generations to come can enjoy this incredibly beautiful tree for centuries.

Ginkgo trees were once widespread in Europe and North America, but were destroyed in most regions during the Ice Age, surviving only in certain regions of China. They would be extinct today had it not been for the preservation efforts of some Buddhist Monks. Planted in their temple gardens, Ginkgos soon became a sacred tree in both China and Japan.

Ginkgo trees also have many increasingly important medicinal values as well. (A good argument for plant species preservation.) The earliest mention of this use comes in the writings of Pen T'sao Ching, published in 2800 B.C. and associated with China's first sage and emperor Shen Nung. It seems some members of the royal court were becoming a bit senile in their golden years. As the emperor looked out of his window, a voice whispered, "the tree you are now looking at will restore the minds of your relatives and friends." Not being one to ignore voices in his head, he instructed the staff to pick some leaves and create a brew out of them. The warm tea was served to those afflicted several times a day. Within weeks, the author noted that everyone of them had regained much of their lost memories. Ironically, studies regarding

Alzheimer's disease show that Ginkgo biloba shows promise in the reduction of symptoms, at least at an early stage of the disease.

Growing Info: Ginkgo trees are quite adaptable, hardy in regions that reach as low as -20 degrees F/-29 degrees C (USDA Zone 5 & up) and will thrive in a variety of soils.

Its main requirement is adequate drainage. They may be started indoors and transplanted in fall or spring. Young trees can be pruned in early spring, but mature specimens rarely require pruning. Ginkgos love full sun and young trees should at first be staked, then watered during dry periods until they reach about 20 feet.

Thereafter, a more standard watering pattern is sufficient. If planting a possible female tree, an isolated, sunny location of the garden is best. This is because female trees will bear yellowish plum-shaped fruit with a somewhat foul smelling meat (like rancid butter some say) whose outer skin is mildly toxic. Fallen fruits will usually burst open their fleshy coating, thus releasing the odor. In an outdoor setting, the smell is not too overpowering, but avoid planting near car ports or along roads as some people have reported paint damage from the fruits juices. That's the bad news.

The good news about female trees is that the fruits can be picked (while wearing latex gloves) and the nuts removed from the pungent smelling meat of the fruit. When first blanched, the nuts are edible and indeed are consumed in many parts of the world. The nuts will not be viable seeds for planting unless there is a male tree nearby. Ginkgos will take about 20 years of growth before they start to reproduce. The flowers of the trees are rather inconspicuous and will appear in spring, with male trees producing cones and females the fruit.

Male trees are usually those offered in the nurseries and have been propagated from cuttings. They are sometimes presented with the names of 'Autumn Gold', 'Fairmount', 'Princeton Sentry' and 'Lakeview' at local nurseries. There is no way of telling a male from female nut, so planting by seed could produce either sex.

Owning both male and female trees though could be beneficial in more ways than just their ornamental beauty. Although Ginkgo trees are becoming more prevalent, they are still on the "New York Botanical Garden Threatened and Endangered Plant List" and have barely escaped extinction once already. With their medicinal values still being uncovered, both sexes of trees produce the leaves which are becoming more increasingly in demand as supplemental diet and/or natural medicinal ingredients.

In general, the Maidenhair tree will grow from about 80 to 100 feet tall, but no more than half to two-thirds as wide. They have characteristic fan-shaped leaves that are usually bi-lobed and leathery. Leaves in spring are a light green, but will suddenly turn a pure, dazzling yellow in the fall, remaining for awhile on the tree, then suddenly dropping virtually all of them at the same time.

A convenient time for Ginkgo leaf harvesting. Standard Uses: Ginkgo trees have an incredible ability to resist insects and pollution, thus making it a fine ornamental tree, suitable for many regions of the city or suburbs as well as the country side. They have also been planted in regions where owners wish to discourage deer from plundering nearby gardens. Although slow growing trees, with regular watering and fertilizing, growth of about 3 feet per year is possible.

Bonsai enthusiasts also use the Ginkgo Tree, but usually will know it as the Maidenhair Tree. It makes a beautiful specimen, particularly in the fall when the small, bonsai trained leaves turn to a striking gold hue.

Medicinal Uses: Most of the almost 300 published studies and reports done to date, use a standardized Ginkgo biloba extract which is most commonly prescribed by alternative-minded doctors and pharmacists worldwide. Results have indicated it has the ability to increase blood circulation, not only to the brain, but to the extremities of the body as well. It has been shown to inhibit platelet aggregation (the bunching up like a cluster of grapes) and also regulates the tone and elasticity of blood vessels. It's been shown to improve circulation to both large arteries and the smaller capillaries throughout the body. One study showed a 57% increase in blood flow through the nail-fold capillaries within one hour of consumption.

A recent study here in America demonstrated encouraging results in treating the early symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. Ongoing research in Europe and elsewhere has shown the tree leaf extract is extremely effective in the treatment and prevention of strokes, cataracts, diabetic

retinopathy and macular degeneration. Ginkgo extract is also licensed in Germany as a supplemental treatment for ailments such as asthma, transplant rejection, heart arrhythmia, heart attack, head injuries, hearing loss, tinnitus (ringing in the ears), vertigo, depression and cerebrovascular insufficiency (stemming from arteriosclerosis). One known side effect of Ginkgo extracts, teas or powders, is a mild headache that will result if over consumed. These are usually more noticeable in times of physical exertion. Each person's tolerance for dosage seems to be different, so it's best to take small amounts initially, building to the level you'd like to take, just short of causing the annoying side effect. Other Uses: Ginkgo trees are sometimes used to create rather beautiful Bonsai trees. Their unique leaf structure and their deciduous nature make them very attractive specimens. The true nature of this tree's history also makes for some very good talking points to discuss with those who admire your Ginkgo tree bonsai style.

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