

Golden Gingko

By Susan Camp

Fall color appeared to be at its peak on the Middle Peninsula this past week. Several days of bright blue sky and sunshine have enhanced the reds, gold, and yellows of the leaves.

While the fall colors of most trees are beautiful, I think the most enchanting and breathtaking are the luminous, golden leaves of the *Gingko biloba*. The gingko or maidenhair tree is considered a “living fossil”. It has existed virtually unchanged for 150-200 million years, meaning that during the age of the dinosaurs, it looked much as it does now. According to a 2013 interview in *Environment360* with Peter Crane, dean of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Sciences, *Gingko biloba* is the only one of the five known seed groups that contains only one species. The gingko once grew over much of the globe, but eventually survived only in China. Discovered and shipped to Europe and America in the mid-18th century, gingko trees quickly naturalized. Today the gingko is planted as a shade tree, as well as a street tree in many American cities, including Manhattan and Chicago.

How has the gingko survived unchanged for millions of years? One reason is that almost no diseases or insect pests affect it. Apparently, the leaves have an unpleasant taste that repels insects. It is resistant to *Verticillium* wilt, a soil-borne fungal disease that attacks the roots of many other species of trees (VCE Publication 450-619). The gingko will thrive in Planting Zones 4-9. It will grow in wet, moist, or dry, clayey, loamy, or sandy soil and tolerate a pH of 3.7-8, salt spray and air pollution. (VCE Publications 426-610, 450-237, 430-026, and 430-031) Gingko is a great tree for paved areas and parking lots. (VCE Publication 430-028) It is easy to transplant and grow and you just can't kill it. (VCE Publication 2901-1046)

The gingko has one major design flaw. It is dioecious, meaning that both male and female trees are produced. Plant only a male tree, either from a cultivar or clone. Good cultivars to plant are ‘Fastigiata’, ‘Princeton Sentry’, and ‘Autumn Gold’. The female tree develops a foul-smelling, plum-like fruit that will make the immediate environment very unpleasant.

The female fruit contains a gingko nut, which looks much like a pistachio. The gingko nut is said to be tasty and is used in Asian cooking and Chinese medicine. The nut may be mildly toxic to some people and the outer covering of the fruit can cause skin irritation. *Gingko biloba* preparations advertised to improve memory and prevent dementia are produced from the gingko leaves. At this time, there is no solid evidence that gingko is helpful for memory. *Gingko biloba* may cause increased bleeding, especially in patients on anticoagulant therapy. Consumers should use caution when taking *gingko biloba* in conjunction with other plant preparations that can have the same effect: ginseng, garlic, and ginger.

Our ginkgo tree is young, perhaps 25 years old, planted by the previous owners. It is about 25-30 feet tall; it won't reach its full growth of 80-115 feet for at least another 25 years. Other than light pruning in early spring to remove suckers, we have done very little to it over the years. Every fall, our ginkgo rewards us with a long-lasting, butter yellow light show of luminous, fan-shaped leaves. One day they start to drop, and in about 36 hours they are all on the ground. I would shed a tear, but I know that in the spring our ginkgo will produce a fresh crop of leaves and the cycle will begin again.

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