Ginkgo biloba

The Gingko biloba tree is unique. It is considered to be a living fossil. In fact, it is the oldest living deciduous tree, meaning they lose all of their leaves in autumn. The bifurcating (splitting) leaves are unique and easily recognizable. Some leaves take on a tube shape until they grow large enough when a split occurs thus resulting in a spreading and flattening of the leaf and the final two-lobed shape.

Fossil imprints of the Gingko's unique two-lobed (biloba) leaves can be found in layered sedimentary rock dating to 270 million years ago. Climatologists are able to study the number and density of pores in the imprints of the leaves in order to determine atmospheric CO2 concentrations and how it has changed over time. Changes in pore density correspond exactly with changes in average global temperatures, the onset of glacial periods, and corresponding changes in sea-levels.

Ginkgo trees were once thought to be extinct until a small stand was recently found in China, kept alive for thousands of years by monks. Currently, they are propagated regularly, and due to their pollution tolerant nature, and disease and pest resistant characteristics, the trees are a great choice for lining urban streets. They are drought tolerant and long lived. Some specimens have been reported to live for more than two thousand years.

The trees are very resilient. After the bombing of Hiroshima in August 1945, six Ginkgo biloba trees were found near the blast center. Although all buildings and trees surrounding them were either destroyed or burned completely, the six Ginkgo trees remained and budded later that fall. Because of this event the trees are known as the "The Bearer of Hope". They are survivors and these six trees continue to live today.

Ginkgo trees are dioecious which means there are separate male and female trees. It can take up to twenty years to determine if you have a male or female tree. The fruit-like seeds on from the female trees contain butyric acid. This gives the seeds a rancid butter smell. Many claim it smells like vomit. The fruit also produces urushiol; a variety of which is the substance in poison ivy that causes contact dermatitis. Ginkgo biloba fruit can cause contact dermatitis as well. Care must be taken when handling the fruit. The urushiol is miscible in alcohol, but not in water. Gloves should be worn when handling the fruit. After handling the fruit rubbing alcohol can be used to wash up in order to remove any lingering urushiol oils.

Propagation of the Ginkgo biloba is a relatively simple production. One only needs to wash the fruit from the seeds and store them in a cool place for a few months – perhaps until

Valentine's Day. At which time one can prepare the seeds with scarification or scratching them slightly with sandpaper to help ensure germination, although this is not necessary. A shallow tray or old pan approximately ½-1 inch deep filled with sand or gravel mix is perfect. The pan does not need to have drainage holes. Excess water will evaporate. However, due to the chemical weathering of the minerals in the sand and gravel, and the oxidation of the pan itself, it may be ruined for future cooking use. Any shallow tray will suffice.

Once the seeds are washed and the pan is prepared, the seeds can be placed into the sand and pressed in. The seeds do not need to be completely covered by the sand; only about ½ coverage is acceptable for germination. Pour water slowly over the tray trying not to disturb the seeds too much or they will float to the top. If they do one simply has to press them back into the sand. One wants the entire tray to become saturated with water just starting to rise above the level of the sand. Pouring off excess water is done easily for the surface tension of the water in the pore spaces of the sand will hold the sand and seeds in place. Another germination technique is to utilize old 35 mm film canisters. One can place a small amount of sand into them followed by a seed and then a final amount of sand to cover the seed. Holes can be drilled into the canisters which allows for drainage. The narrow film canisters are a perfect place for fungus to begin to grow so one must allow for drainage.

After about 1 month the seeds will begin to germinate. The seedlings can remain in the tray or canisters until later in the summer. At that time they should be transplanted to larger containers, for the roots will begin to overwhelm the containers.

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Ginkgo biloba also make excellent bonsai trees.