



A ginkgo tree at the First United Methodist Church on West Harvard Avenue in Roseburg. Ginkgo trees tend to lose their leaves over a very short period of time, sometimes in one day. PHOTO COURTESY OF JANET BITTER

ASK A MASTER GARDENER

Ginkgo trees add color

Question: I am looking for a tree to plant in my yard that has nice fall color and is easy to maintain. I'm tired of maples! What else might you suggest?

Answer: I wonder if you've ever thought about planting a ginkgo tree? If you are looking for a tree with a fascinating story as well as beautiful fall color, this may be the tree for you.

Ginkgo biloba, or maidenhair tree, has a very interesting botanical classification. It is not a true broadleaf plant, but not a conifer either.

It is the only member of its genus Ginkgo, which is the only genus in its family Ginkgoaceae, which is the only family in its order Ginkgoales, which is the only order in its subclass Ginkgoideae.

It actually is a living fossil. Today's ginkgo tree is very similar to the plant that grew in the middle Jurassic period 170 million years ago. Not your average tree. Just think how impressed the kids in your life will be to think that your tree could have been dinosaur food.

The species name, biloba, refers to the lobed appearance of its leaves. The common name, maidenhair, refers to the resemblance of its leaves to the fern of the same name. Through a likely transcription error made in the 17th century by naturalist Engelbert Kaempfer, the genus is commonly



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spelled Ginkgo, but you may also see it as Ginkgo.

The ginkgo is native to China, where you will find the only remaining native populations. It is considered an endangered species because it is only found in two remote areas.

One theory on why the tree is not found in its native habitat anymore is that whatever creature initially was part of its pollination story (a dinosaur) is extinct and seed dispersal is not occurring naturally (fruit may not be palatable to current pollinators). However, it is a very popular street tree world wide.

Ginkgos can reach 60-100 feet tall, but initially are very slow growing. They are deep-rooted and resistant to wind or snow damage. Ginkgos need full sun and average water, along with well-drained soil. They are resistant to disease and their wood seems to resist many insects, making them a good tree for the home gardener.

Some trees in cultivation are thought to be over 1,500 years old. There are six ginkgo trees in Hiroshima, Japan, that were among



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Female ginkgo trees produce fruit, which are described as smelling rancid when ripe.

the few living things that survived the atom bomb blast in the zone closest to the target.

Another interesting fact about ginkgos is that they are dioecious – there are male trees and female trees. Most of the ginkgo trees sold in nurseries will be male. There is a good reason for this: the female bears a fruit which, when it is ripe, is described as smelling like rancid butter (and worse, but I won't go into some other writers' descriptive terms).

The male trees do have pollen

which may be an issue to some prone to allergies.

Ginkgos turn a beautiful golden color in the fall. The other great thing is that they tend to lose their leaves over a very short period, sometimes even all in a day. I have seen this phenomenon in action on a local tree and it is very mesmerizing to watch these little golden fans drifting down in a steady stream. Makes for easy raking.

If you would like to see a ginkgo, there are two in the Discovery Garden at River Forks Park. A larger specimen is in the Butterfly Garden area and a newer specimen is in the Japanese Garden area.

Make sure you read the plaque by the younger tree: we are fortunate to have a Peace Tree in Douglas County. It was planted from seed from one of the surviving Hiroshima trees; it was planted Feb. 20, 2020, at 2:20 in the afternoon.

Consider adding a ginkgo tree to your landscape and enjoy its rich history and unique characteristics.

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.