

The Herb Society of America's

Notable Native™ Tree 2021

Gleditsia triacanthos L., Honeylocust



Family: Fabaceae (Pea, with 245 Genera)

Latin Name: *Gleditsia triacanthos* L.; 2 U.S. species + *G. t.* var. *inermis*, thornless honeylocust

Common Name: Honeylocust, sweet bean locust, honey shucks locust

Growth: In natural habitat 80', can grow to 140'

Light: Full sun

Soil: Well drained; tolerates limited drought and flooding

Water: moderate

Use: Historic medicinal; wood, culinary sweetener; animal forage

Propagation: seeds, hardwood cuttings, softwood cuttings

CONSERVATION STATUS: SECURE, possibly invasive.

Gleditsia triacanthos L., Honeylocust
USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database Herman, D.E., et al.
1996. North Dakota tree handbook.

History

Honeylocust is a long-lived (100 years) deciduous tree native to North America, especially the eastern regions, growing in a variety of soils. The genus name *Gleditsia* commemorates the labors of John Gottlieb Gleditsch (1714-1786) who was a botanist, director of the Berlin Botanical Garden, and a contemporary of Linnaeus. The Latin species epithet of honeylocust, *triacanthos*, is from the Greek word *acantha* meaning thorn or prickle and *tri* meaning three, in reference to the large three-branched thorns or spines found growing on the trunk or base of the tree's branches. The

description "honey" describes the sweet, honey-like substance found in its pods.

Description

Honeylocust, a popular street tree in cities, generally grows to 80 feet tall, but can exceed that. It blooms in late spring with showy, drooping racemes of greenish-yellow flowers. The flowers are followed by long (10-18 inches) twisting reddish-brown pods that mature in late summer. Some pods persist through winter. Though not all trees are armed with thorns, many are, making them a formidable barrier in home or park landscapes.

The doubly compound leaves are alternate and dark green in color, providing light shade without shading out nearby plants.

The trees can re-sprout aggressively from the roots.

Culture & Habitat

Honeylocust is found growing in most of the United States except in Washington and Oregon. It is native to central United States and has naturalized east of the Appalachians from South



Mature Honeylocust seed pods.
©Maryann Readal, 2019.

Carolina to New England. It prefers moist, fertile, and deep soils and is often found in floodplain areas. It tolerates drought as well as long periods of wetness. It prefers full sun but will grow in some shade. It is tolerant of both acidic and alkaline soils.

The tree reproduces via sprouts from the tree roots, which can spread and can become a weed problem in pasture areas. Cutting or mowing increases the shoots.



Robert H. Mohlenbrock, hosted by the USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database



Honeylocust thorns. ©Maryann Readal

Uses

The thornless varieties of honeylocust are used to landscape parking lots, along walkways and have been planted as a replacement for the American elm along city streets. The open canopy and small leaves do not shade understory landscape plants or grass.

The tree is also used as a windbreak and for erosion control. Because of its spines, the thorned variety is not suitable for landscape uses; although the thorns appear only on the lower part of the tree's trunk and lower branches.



Honeylocust.
William R. Barbour, USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database

The sweet pulp of the honeylocust bean pods is eaten by wildlife and domestic animals. Browsing and grazing animals also eat the bark in the winter and the tender shoots in spring.

Native Americans used the pods and bark as medicine for a number of common maladies such as measles, coughs, blood disorders, dyspepsia, fevers, and colds.

The wood of honeylocust is hard and resistant to soil decay. It is used as fuel and to make fence posts, pallets, crates, and railroad ties. Woodworkers use it to make guitars and Native Americans used it to make their bows.

The seeds can be roasted and used as a coffee substitute. Native Americans used the pulp as a sweetener. The fermented pulp has been used to make ethanol.

The pulp within the pods is sweet and has been eaten raw and made into sugar.

Propagation

Honeylocust is self-fertilizing as well as pollinated by insects. The seed is viable for long periods due to an impermeable seedcoat. Seeds are dispersed by birds and mammals, and is apparently enhanced by passage through the digestive tract of animals.

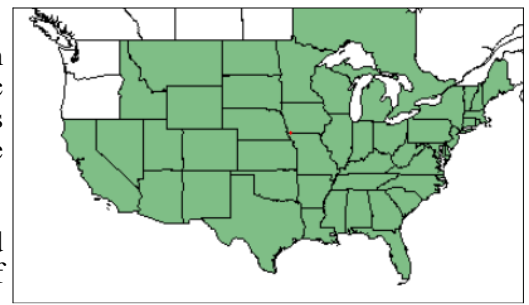
The trees can also be propagated by grafting, budding, hardwood and softwood cuttings as well as root cuttings.

Pollinators

The flowers are a favorite of pollinating insects, especially small bees and flies. It is a host for the silver-spotted skipper and is a source of pollen and nectar for bees.

References

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Honeylocust distribution (areas shaded in green).
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