

May 2025

Plant of the month

yin xing, Maidenhair Tree



Common Name: yin xing, Maidenhair Tree
Scientific Name: *Ginkgo biloba* L.
Family: Ginkgoaceae
Genus: *Ginkgo* a misspelling of the Japanese *gin kyo*, 'silver apricot' (wand)
Species epithet: *biloba* - two lobed leaf



Ginkgo biloba, sometimes referred to as a 'living fossil', is the only surviving member of an ancient order (Ginkgoales) of seed bearing plants around 270 million years old. Individual trees and populations of trees are renowned and revered for their longevity. They have been cultivated for thousands of years in China and many examples of planted and wild trees thought to be over one thousand years old exist, including a penjing (bonsai) specimen said to be 1,300 years old. Plants were brought to Japan with Buddhism in the 6th CE and the oldest specimen in Europe, planted in Utrecht Botanic Gardens in 1730 still survives, as does the specimen at Kew Garden planted in 1762. Their longevity is due in part to their resistance to insect attack and ability to regrow vegetatively.

The nut-like gametophytes inside the seeds are a traditional Chinese food, often served at special occasions including New Year. Both seeds and leaves have been used in traditional Chinese medicine for hundreds of years for a wide range of conditions.



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Distribution

The Tianmushan Reserve, Zhejiang province in eastern China.

Native Habitat

Deciduous forests in valleys with acidic soil.

Description

Tall, usually broad domed deciduous trees to 40 m. Unique fan shaped (bilobed) leaves that resemble the leaves of the Maidenhair Fern. Trees are prized for their autumn foliage when leaves turn a beautiful butter yellow.

Reproduction

Trees are dioecious, meaning some trees are male and others female. These ancient trees are unique in that they do not produce flowers or cones. Male trees bear small spikes of pollen sacs and female trees form two ovules at the end of a stalk, usually one develops into a seed after fertilization.

Seeds

The seed is 1.5-2 cm long, covered in a fleshy outer layer that is light yellow brown, soft and fruit-like. It has an unpleasant smell like rancid butter or vomit when mature.

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