

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



February 15, 2017

I trust everyone had a fun, sweet Valentine's Day with their honey. Time for our second tree friend of 2017 and another kind of honey – the Honeylocust tree. Originally found growing in river valleys throughout central North America, in recent years several honeylocust cultivars have also been widely planted as shade trees, including the two Sunburst® Honeylocusts we enjoy in our front yard.

Do you know how the honeylocust tree got its name? No, it's not a honey plant. The honey name comes from the sweet taste of the pulp of the seed pods, while the locust name, first used to describe carob bean pods that somewhat resemble locust insects, was later extended to other pod bearing trees.

The honeylocust is a rapidly growing tree with pinnately compound leaves that provide the wonderful light, filtered shade enjoyed by lawn grass and people alike. All honeylocusts provide golden yellow fall color while the Sunburst® variety also provides bright golden-bronze spring color.

The fruit of honeylocusts is a flat legume pod with edible pulp that are dispersed by grazing herbivores. Native Americans used the pods for food and to treat rheumatoid arthritis and cancer.

Honeylocust trees are also known for their single, branched, or dense clusters of thorns that may reach 4 inches in length. Scientists have determined that thorns first appeared on locust trees many thousands of years ago as a defense against the megafauna of the Pleistocene Age. And while mammoths no longer roam the Earth, native locust trees still have thorns. Of course, many modern cultivars are thornless and/or seedless which is convenient for homeowners but kind of takes the fun out of it. Did you know that in the past the thorns of younger trees were used for nails?

Like soybeans and alfalfa, honeylocust trees are capable of fixating nitrogen in the soil. While not common in Iowa, leguminous trees are prolific in the tropics, including southeast Asia. The tamarind tree growing in our son's backyard also provides filtered shade and abundant seed pods. And, yes, Lao people still collect the pods for their sweet-tasting pulp.



In a story closer to home, many of us grew up following the adventures of the American folk hero Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier. The Tennessee frontiersman later entered military and political life and served several terms in Congress. Opposing President Jackson's Indian Removal Act, he lost his bid for re-election in 1835. As he left office, he angrily declared, "You can all go to hell and I'm going to Texas." Crockett joined the Texas Revolution and three months later died in the Battle of the Alamo.

I'll close with these lines from his 1827 introduction speech in the House of Representatives. "I'm that same David Crockett, fresh from the backwoods, half-horse, half-alligator, a little touched with the snapping turtle; can wade the Mississippi, leap the Ohio, ride upon a streak of lightning, and slip without a scratch down a honey locust tree."