



# Ginkgo

Famous for its unique fan-shaped leaves and smelly autumn fruits, ginkgo, also known as the maidenhair tree, holds the title of being the world's oldest living tree species. *Ginkgo biloba* has been around since the time of the dinosaurs over 200 million years ago, and though it was once widespread throughout the world along with other similar tree species, today, this lone survivor of its kind can only be found in the wild in the remote mountain valleys of China's eastern Zhejiang province.



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## Cultivation + Distribution

Ginkgo trees have been cultivated for well over 1000 years in China. First in Buddhist temples as a local substitute for the sacred fig tree underneath which Buddha was believed to have reached enlightenment, and then in small orchard groves for its nut-like seed. The tree made its way to Japan and Korea in the 14th and 15th centuries via coastal trade routes, where it was first encountered by the West in 1692. Descriptions of the plant by Engelbert Kaempfer of the Dutch East India Company in his accounts of his time in Japan is the first appearance of “ginkgo” in western literature. Living plants were then introduced into Europe several decades later in the mid 1700’s.

## Cultural Significance

Ginkgos have long been associated with longevity in East Asian cultures due to their long life span. Some of the oldest ginkgo trees in the world are estimated to be close to 1500 years old, most of which are found in Buddhist temples where ginkgo trees were first cultivated. Similarly, because of their ability to withstand and thrive in the face of change, ginkgo trees are also commonly associated with resilience and perseverance. This connection is particularly strong in Japan, where a small handful of ginkgo trees managed to survive the nuclear bombing in Hiroshima, one of the few species to do so.

Because of their rich cultural significance, ginkgo are popular subjects in East Asian art, including penjing and bonsai, and are commonly used in logos and as official symbols. Well known examples include its status as the national tree of China, the official tree of the cities of Chengdu, China and Tokyo, Japan, and the ginkgo leaf being an official symbol of both Tokyo and the Urasenke school of Japanese tea.



# Common Uses

## Landscaping

Today, ginkgo trees can be found lining streets around the world, from New York, to Paris, to Seoul to right here in Vancouver. This resilient tree species is a popular ornamental plant because it is highly resistance to pests and disease, and has the ability to grow well even in the low oxygen, high salt environment of urban areas. The unique fan shaped leaves also turn a gorgeous golden yellow in autumn providing some additional colour to their surroundings. The majority of the ginkgo trees used for landscaping are male, as the fruits of the female tree give off a rancid odor when they ripen in autumn.

## Food & Medicine

While the ripe fruits of ginkgo trees may cause some to lose their appetite, the nut-like seeds that they enclose are a special delicacy in East Asia, commonly eaten as a toasted snack, or as a prized ingredient with health benefits. In traditional Chinese herbal medicine, ginkgo nuts are cited in helping with blood and oxygen circulation, brain function, and soothing coughs, and are commonly found in Chinese cuisine as an ingredient in congee (a porridge-like dish made from boiling rice and/or other grains), sweet soups, or stir fries such as the popular vegetarian dish, Buddha's Delight. In Japan, it's a key ingredient of the savoury steamed egg custard dish chawanmushi, and in Korea, they are popular both as a nutty garnish or a grilled street food. While the culinary applications of ginkgo never caught on in the west, similar to its Chinese herbal medicine applications, ginkgo extract is used in western medicines that treat brain and memory illnesses, such as dementia and Alzheimer's.

