

Fun Facts about Trees

BENEFICIAL LANDSCAPES

Justin Evertson

Trees are almost universally appreciated by people across the globe. Although we don't always treat them well, there just seems to be something about them that we find interesting and comforting. That's at least partly because of the incredible range of shapes, forms and colors they come in and also because of the many benefits they provide.



A very smart person once said that a deeper understanding about trees is a deeper understanding about the universe. Okay, that was me, but I stand by it. Anyhow, here are just a few fun and fascinating facts about trees you can use to impress your friends and family members.

1. About 1,000 distinct species of trees are native to North America with about 50 species being native to Nebraska. It is estimated that another 40,000 to 50,000 species are native to tropical forests around the world.
2. Nebraska was only 3 percent forested at the time of settlement by European immigrants in the 1800s. However, the state is at a unique crossroads being at the western limit of the eastern hardwood forest and the eastern extent of the Rocky Mountain pinelands. Nebraska is also home to relic boreal species such as birch and aspen brought here with the last ice age over 10,000 years ago.
3. More than 250 distinct species and hybrids of trees can now be found growing somewhere in Nebraska, including at arboretums. About 50 species are evergreens, another 35 are oaks, 25 are maples, 15 are elms and 12 are nut trees.
4. The tallest tree in the world is a 379' coast redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) in California known as "Hyperion." It is nearly as tall as the Nebraska State Capitol which is 396' to the top of the tower.
5. The tallest trees in Nebraska can reach to about 110' tall including sycamores, cottonwoods and silver poplars. The national champion eastern cottonwood grows near Beatrice Nebraska and is 88' tall, has a 108' crown spread and a trunk circumference of 37'.
6. "General Sherman," a giant sequoia growing in California, is 275' tall with a trunk circumference of nearly 100'. It is the largest tree by volume in the world and is estimated to be 2,500 years old.
7. The world's oldest tree with a single trunk is a 5,070 year old bristlecone pine growing in California. The oldest trees in Nebraska are Rocky Mountain junipers growing in the Wildcat Hills near Scottsbluff and estimated to be over 800 years old. Some oaks in Nebraska have been dated to be over 400 years old.
8. "Pando," a clonal colony of quaking aspen in Utah, is estimated to be over 80,000 years old, weighs over 6,600 tons, has over 40,000 trunks and covers more than 106 acres, making it the heaviest living organism in the world.
9. Nebraska has seven native oak species: bur, red, black, chinkapin, blackjack, white and dwarf chinkapin oak. At least 30 other oak species can be grown in the state.
10. Native Nebraska trees tapped by American Indians for syrup included boxelder maple, silver maple and black walnut.
11. Limber pine, native to near the Wyoming state line in western Kimball County, is named for its extremely "limber" branches that resist heavy snow loads and that can be tied into knots.
12. Coffeetree (top photo) is named for its hard seeds that were roasted and brewed into a coffee-like drink by early settlers. Its compound leaf is the longest leaf of any native tree, often reaching over 30" long. The tree's scientific name is "*Gymnocladus*" which means "naked branch" owing to the naked look of the tree when its large compound leaves are shed in the fall.
13. Coffeetree is considered an evolutionary anachronism since North American elephants and other mega-fauna that evolved to eat its fruit went extinct long ago, leaving the tree without good seed dispersers for the last 20,000 years.
14. Before being wiped out by a blight disease in the early 1900s, the American chestnut may have accounted for up to 25 percent of all eastern U.S. hardwood trees. The tree was so common that it was said a squirrel could climb up a chestnut tree in Maine and travel along interconnected branches all the way to Georgia without ever touching the ground. Scientists are working hard to develop disease-resistant varieties that can be reintroduced into the wild.
15. Hackberry (*Celtis occidentalis*) was recently reclassified from the elm family to the cannabis family. Fossilized seeds indicate that a grove of hackberry in Hackberry Hollow in Cheyenne County is tens of thousands of years old.

