

FORESTRY

A Kentucky coffeetree in Hagerstown is one of Maryland's 12 national champion trees.

Maryland's Big Tree Program

A Tribute to State Champions

It all started with Fred Besley.

That's right — the roots of today's "Big Tree" records can all be traced back to one exceptionally dedicated, forward-thinking individual. Among his many outstanding contributions to forestry conservation and management, Fred W. Besley, Maryland's first State Forester, can also be credited as the father of the National Big Tree Champion Contest. Besley, Maryland's longest-serving State Forester, held the position for 36 years, from 1906 to 1942.

In his publication, *Big Tree Champions of Maryland: A Record of the Largest Trees of the Principal Species*, printed in 1956, Besley discussed the birth of the Big Tree Contest. He wrote that the forests of Maryland were rich in different kinds of trees, "probably more than 250 native species, and there was a universal interest in notable trees." Because of this, Besley was inspired "to organize a Big Tree program in which would be collected measurements and photographs of the distinguished trees of Maryland." It appears that until 1925, Besley worked alone on this project.

"By 1925, the interest in large trees and noted trees had so increased," Besley wrote, "that the Maryland Forestry Association sponsored a statewide Big Tree Champion contest. Prizes were offered, rules were adopted, and wide publicity given to secure as many entries as possible. Each tree species was classified separately so that smaller trees such as dogwood and persimmon would not have to compete with such larger trees as oaks and elms."

Besley developed a method of measuring "big" that was soon adopted by the American Forestry Association, with only slight modifications. As he recollected: "At this time [early 1900s] there were no standard measurements of trees, so it was necessary to draw up standards to ensure fair comparisons. The author devised the following standards. To qualify as a tree, the specimen must have a single stem or trunk for at least 4½ feet above the ground level and a total height of 15 feet." Three key measurements were factored together to determine a champion tree; these were based on trunk circumference, crown spread and the height of the tree.

In 1925, the year the first statewide Maryland Big Tree Champion Contest was held, a total

of 450 entries were received. Besley recalled that he acted much as "an umpire in measuring those [trees that] appeared to be competitors in the prize-winning class." After all was said and done, the first Maryland Big Tree Champion list contained 155 species, among them the Wye Oak, the largest white oak ever recorded. Twelve years later, a revised list was published and released.

Dickson J. Preston, author of the book, *Wye Oak: The History of a Great Tree*, was the first to detail Besley's efforts to expand the Maryland Big Tree Contest to a national level. Preston writes: "...in 1940, he [Besley] suggested to the American Forestry Association (of which he was by now a senior member of the board) a means of putting the Wye Oak and other declared [Maryland] national champions to the test. His proposal was a national contest along the lines he had been conducting in Maryland. Readers of *American Forests*... would be invited to send in measurements of trees they thought should be national champions, and the winner would be chosen by the Besley system of measurement."

Marking Their Existence in Centuries, Not Decades

One of the longest reigning State champions and a National Champion white oak, the Wye Oak (*Quercus alba*) that formerly stood in Wye Mills in the northern part of Talbot County, was over 400 years old at the time of its demise. So special a specimen was the tree that a state park was formed around the giant old oak, and local

spent considerable efforts caring for the tree for the better part of 60 years. Valiant battles against advancing age and elements eventually led to the oak's trunk being filled with cement, and its heavy branches cabled in efforts to keep the tree whole and alive. Unfortunately the Wye Oak fell in a fierce thunderstorm in June of 2002 and just like that, the search was on to find the state's next champion white oak. The title was awarded to a tree in Anne Arundel County; however, the current National Champion is in Virginia.

Other Maryland Trees noted for their longevity and historical presence include the Liberty Tree located at St. John's College in Annapolis. A tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), it was believed to have been approximately 400 years old and occupied a prominent spot on the front lawn of the college where many large official gatherings took place. In colonial times, the Sons of Liberty met under the tree, and the famed Revolutionary War hero Lafayette attended an event honoring him on the college green in 1824. The first Methodist sermon was delivered under it in 1772. The tree was so famous that the Daughters of the American Revolution put up a fence to protect it from souvenir hunters who would cut away pieces to take home. Although well-tended, the Liberty's health deteriorated, and it eventually fell victim to the heavy rains and winds of Tropical Storm Floyd in September of 1999. A ceremony celebrating its life was held and the tree was lovingly dismantled.

Another famed white oak is the Lutheran White Oak, located in the town of Manchester in Carroll County. The tree was already large enough to be considered a landmark when, in 1758, King George III gave a charter to build a church nearby. Believed to be 320 years old, the tree still stands at Immanuel Evangelical Episcopal Church and is reported to be healthy.

The Burnside Sycamore (*Plantanus occidentalis*), or Witness Tree, was growing on the shores of Antietam Creek at the time of the Civil War battle that claimed 22,000 lives on September 17, 1862. Named for the Union general from which the term "sideburns" originated, pictures taken just days later show the young tree still standing. It is located in the Antietam National Battlefield near Sharpsburg in Washington County. Although it lost several large limbs in August of 2003 and did some



The Wye Oak

arborists and technicians from the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Forestry Service

Maryland's National Champions

| English Name | Latin Name | Location | Circ. | Ht | Crown | Score |
|---------------------|------------------------------|------------------|--------|-----|-------|-------|
| Mockernut hickory | <i>Carya tomentosa</i> | Upper Marlboro | 14'10" | 108 | 65 | 302 |
| Chestnut oak | <i>Quercus prinus</i> | Severna Park | 22'9" | 104 | 99 | 407 |
| Common chokecherry | <i>Prunus virginiana</i> | Owings Mills | 14'0" | 74 | 88 | 264 |
| Honeylocust | <i>Gleditsia triacanthos</i> | Ijamsville | 20'4" | 90 | 65 | 350 |
| Black mulberry | <i>Morus nigra</i> | Westminster | 21'0" | 78 | 76 | 349 |
| Althea | <i>Hibiscus syriacus</i> | Arnold | 0'8" | 19 | 13 | 30 |
| Slippery elm | <i>Ulmus rubra</i> | Frederick | 19'10" | 108 | 96 | 370 |
| Kentucky coffeetree | <i>Gymnocladus dioica</i> | Hagerstown | 16'11" | 85 | 82 | 309 |
| Boxelder | <i>Acer negundo</i> | Monrovia | 19'5" | 93 | 79 | 346 |
| Shagbark hickory | <i>Carya ovata</i> | Edgewater | 15'4" | 98 | 107 | 309 |
| American beech | <i>Fagus grandifolia</i> | Lothian | 24'2" | 112 | 103 | 428 |
| American hazelnut | <i>Corylus americana</i> | Prince Frederick | 2'6" | 27 | 21 | 62 |



Big trees, Officially

An official "Big Tree" is based on a point system. To nominate a tree for Big Tree status, you need to know three measurements:

- Trunk Circumference (in inches)
- Vertical Tree Height (to the nearest foot)
- Average Crown Spread (to the nearest foot)

Trunk Circumference and Height and ¼ Average Crown Spread = Total Points.

A member of the DNR Forest Service or Maryland Forestry Board Association will need to visit the site and verify the three measurements. They will also verify the tree species, tree owner's information, take photos, and make note of the tree's health and location.

Big Tree nominators can contact John Bennett, Cecil County Forestry Board, at Dottiejobennett@aol.com or Dave Reinecke, DNR Forest Service, at dreinecke@dnr.state.md.us to determine if the tree meets the required 70 percent point total of the particular species Maryland Champ's point total before arranging a site visit.

Maryland's Big Tree list currently includes 1,761 trees, with 281 State Champions. The National Register of Big Trees includes 826 species from every state in the nation. To check out the American Forests' National Register of Big Trees, contact www.americanforests.org.



The country's largest Common chokecherry resides in Owings Mills, Maryland.

damage to the famed bridge it grew next to, they both still stand today. Antietam sycamores can be purchased from American Forests Historic Tree Nursery.

In the town of Elkton in Cecil County is the Holly Hall Oak. Yet another white oak, it is believed to be over 437 years old. The tree grew along Route 40 and came to prominence in the late 1970s when a developer purchased the surrounding land to build a shopping mall. Although the developers announced they would deed the tree to the town for preservation that was never done. The tree is still alive but according to DNR's Cecil

County Forester, it "is in poor condition, many limbs have been removed and there is dieback in the crown and severe decay."

The Hoover Sycamore is another famous old tree in Carroll County. President Herbert C. Hoover once visited his ancestral home near Linwood, where he pointed out the large tree planted by his forefather, Andrew Hoover, about 1740. This tree still stands and at last report, is said to be looking very well.

Wherever they set roots — in your yard, a public park or a state forest — a tree's rewards are many. Outside of their sheer aesthetic value, trees provide much of the oxygen we breathe, homes and habitat for many wildlife species, soil retention and watershed protection, and energy saving benefits. Millions of people work with trees, from public service agencies to certified arborists, to nurserymen.

As conscientious citizens and landowners, we should not only provide proper care for our trees, but take pride in their health and beauty as well. And who knows? That beloved tree — that has served for years as jungle gym to generations of children and shade for many a family picnic — may turnout to be a Big Tree Champion one day.

Citizens that locate and nominate a Big Tree candidate carry on a legacy started here in Maryland by our own Fred Besley. Indeed it is a noble cause, the same as announced in the first National Big Tree Champion contest held in 1940: "...to locate 'the largest living specimens of American trees and focus attention on the benefits of conserving these cherished landmarks.'" ❖