The Esplanade Association's Adopt-a-Tree Program

Adopting a tree helps us prune and maintain the Esplanade's nearly 2,000 trees.

Honey Locust (Gleditsia triacanthos)

TREE OF THE MONTH – JANUARY

A North American tree, the Honey locust is found in river valleys ranging from southeastern South Dakota to New Orleans and central Texas and as far east as eastern Massachusetts. The Honey locust blooms in late spring with a cream colored, sweet smelling flower. The tree's pinnately compound leaves are bright green and cast a lovely dappled shade beneath them. They turn bright yellow in the fall and are so fine they disappear without removal —a characteristic that makes this tree attractive in an urban setting.

The Honey locust has been widely planted in cities because of its toughness, salt, and pollution tolerance and rapid growth rate. The trees transplant easily and are tolerant of heat, drought, and poor soil conditions. The Honey locust, a member of the pea family, produces large flat pods in the fall, which do look like giant peas. These pods contain a seed, which, when young, can be cooked and eaten - and actually taste like peas. The pods also contain a very sweet pulp, which is the origin of the name. The tree itself has nothing to do with honey and in fact is rarely visited by bees. However, the pulp is edible and is enjoyed by deer and other wildlife. In addition, the pulp was used as food for Native Americans and can also be fermented to make beer. When roasted they can be used as a coffee bean substitute. At one time these pods were thought to be an excellent food source for cattle or pigs and experiments were made trying to establish plantations of them for this purpose. The first experiment was done in the Washington area on the land that later housed the Pentagon. In addition to the dried pods, the young bark is another food source as it is stripped from the trees by deer and fox squirrels and eaten.

The native Honey locust is covered by vicious thorns. It is thought that these thorns are remnants of its co-evolution with the Mastodon, which was a huge grazing animal or plant predator. The thorns kept these giant herbivores from browsing on the tasty trees. While the mastodons and wooly mammoths disappeared from North America 11,000 years ago, the thorns of the Honey locust persist. The thorns are so strong that they have been known to puncture tires. Native Americans used them for fishhooks, animal traps, spear points, sewing needles, and even nails. In modern times this tree has been bred to produce a thornless variety, which is called v. *inermis* meaning unarmed. The thornless variety is most commonly planted for landscape purposes, but you can find some heavily thorned specimens of this tree on the Esplanade just east of the Harvard Bridge right along the pathway as you descend the pedestrian ramp. Be careful!

The wood of the Honey locust is very durable, resistant to decay, and shrinkage. It polishes well which makes it useful for handrails and doors, and because it is rot resistant, it is used for outdoor furniture, fence posts, railroad ties, and siding. It is also a source of wood for custom furniture.

There are many Honey locust trees on the Esplanade and in Boston. It has been planted extensively because of its lovely color, high canopy, tough and tolerant nature and, of course, its ability to repel the mastodon!

If you would like to adopt a Honey locust or other tree on the Esplanade, please contact Megan Sampson at 617-227-0365, msampson@esplanadeassociation.org or **click here** for an enrollment.