

# 2023: YEAR OF THE TREE



*Tilia Americana* aka "Basswood"

## JULY SPOTLIGHT: THE AMERICAN LINDEN

By Dan Sardaro, Awbury Arboretum

We have examined some smaller trees with stunning visual features in the previous months. However, these species, like Witch Hazel, Redbud, and the Fringe Tree, are “vertically challenged,” to put it kindly. For all those that enjoy a large, stately tree with a presence, you’re in luck this month.

The American Linden (*Tilia Americana*) stands tall and mighty in any landscape. If you’ve never heard of this tree before, it might be because it is more commonly known as the Basswood. Regardless of your chosen name, this tree is a wonder to behold.

The American Linden is a fast-growing, deciduous tree native to Philadelphia. Still, its range extends from the northeastern parts of Maine and New Brunswick to the western reaches of North Dakota and Manitoba and as far south as Arkansas and Oklahoma. Its home is in central hardwood woodlands where it can reach heights of 60-80 feet tall – but if the conditions are just right, it can hit heights of almost 100 feet.

Tannersville, Pennsylvania, was home to a national champion at one point. In 1947, a specimen at the base of Big Pocono Mountain was deemed the largest of its kind in the country, boasting a massive 104-foot height and 75-foot canopy spread. Its base measured an impressive 20 feet, 7 inches in circumference.

As if its pure size wasn’t enough, its 300-year-old lifespan made it even more of an incredible tree. To put that in perspective, when William Penn arrived in

the area in 1682, this juvenile tree had already carved out a space for itself in the forest.

Not all individuals are that tall, however – you can find smaller trees around the Philadelphia urban landscape. You can even locate one within the picnic grove in Awbury’s English Landscape.

There are a few quick ways to identify the American Linden. Larger trees often have two or more trunks, giving them a forked appearance. Its bark is gray and furrowed with flat ridges as if someone took a rolling pin over them. And the leaves are heart-shaped with fine teeth at the edges.

This time of year, the American Linden is finishing its flowering season. These light-yellow blooms that blossom from the ends of long stalks are subtle compared to other flowering species, but they have a pleasant fragrance up close.

More importantly, according to one study, these flowers attract a copious number of pollinators (66 different types), giving the American Linden the nickname “bee tree.”

American Lindens line the street along one block of Girard Avenue in my Brewerytown neighborhood. This time of year, the canopies are buzzing with activity. Honey made from the nectar of the American Linden produces a choice grade of honey to boot!

On top of these trees being promising for pollinators, other creatures find haven as well. Flower buds provide birds and deer a winter meal when the pickings are slim. The fruit, a small nut-like berry called a drupe, also offers small mammals a meal.

The wood decays easily, especially in individuals older than 120, and creates pockets for cavity-nesting critters like wood ducks, pileated woodpeckers, and other birds and small mammals.

But the benefits don’t stop there. Native Americans traditionally used the tree sap for a watery drink or syrup since it contains high sugar levels. They ate young leaves and used the cambium (a thin layer of plant tissue) for bread and soups.

Even the bark was widely used. Emergency bandages could be fashioned from fresh cuts of bark, or soaking and separating it created fibers necessary for rope, netting, shoes, and clothing.

Today, a hot bath with linden flowers washed down with a soothing cup of linden-flower tea is said to mitigate cold symptoms and encourage a good night’s sleep. So the question remains: what can’t this tree do?

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### Fast Facts: American Linden

- The wood of the American Linden tree is lightweight, soft, and easy to work with. It has been used for making a variety of products, including model building, sculpting, and instrument making, especially for electric guitars and wind instruments, thanks to its excellent acoustic properties.
- The fragrant flowers are distilled for use in perfumes.
- American Linden trees are commonly planted in urban areas where they provide shade, improve air quality, and contribute to the aesthetic appeal of city landscapes.
- The tree’s edible leaves have been used for livestock and human consumption and the fibrous, pliable inner bark (bast) was a significant source of fiber for ropes, cords, mats and nets used by Native Americans and early European settlers.
- American linden was cultivated in North America as early as 1752.
- Members of the Iroquois tribe carved ceremonial masks on living trees, then cut them off and hollowed out the backs. These “False Face” masks were used in healing rituals that invoke the spirit of an ancient hunch-backed healing man called “Old Broken Nose.”

2023 is the Year of Trees at Awbury Arboretum in Germantown. As part of their celebration, author Dan Sardaro’s column features a tree each month. Read all of his columns at [awbury.org](http://awbury.org). Visit the Arboretum for special speakers and other “tree-mendous” events throughout the year!

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