
The largest tree in the world

Did you ever hear of a tree with 3,350 trunks? That's right—Just one tree with more than 3,000 trunks. It looks more like a forest than a tree.

It's the largest known tree in the world, but by no means the tallest. It grows in Ceylon, an island a little larger than West Virginia, about fifty-five miles from the southeast coast of India. According to the latest information available, this tree has 350 large trunks and 3,000 small ones.

It's a Banyan tree (*Ficus bengalensis*, L.) and is one of nature's wonders. The name BANYAN is derived from the word BANYAS, or Hindu traders, who found the natural shelter of the large branches an idea market place. So thick is the foliage that the sun does not penetrate the dense shade of some of these large trees.

The Banyan tree is a native species of India. The lower branches, growing out from the main trunk, are so long that they would sag to the ground if not propped up. The tree itself provides these props in the form of secondary trunks, which develop from aerial roots growing downward at irregular intervals along the underside of the branches. When these roots reach the ground, they take root and grow into the earth.

Although the largest Banyan trees may reach a height of only about one hundred feet, their growth horizontally is virtually unlimited under favorable conditions.

A Banyan tree may start from a seed-bearing fig, dropped into the top of a palm tree by a bird. When the seed inside the fig sprouts, it is at first nourished by the substance of the fig, as it grows downward. After reaching the ground and taking root, the nourishment provided by the soil causes the young tree to develop its main trunk and branches



This Banyan tree at Edison Botanical Gardens, Fort Myers, Fla., has over 100 aerial roots with a 352-foot circumference.

rapidly. As it grows, eventually the host tree is enveloped and being deprived of light, air and moisture, it withers away.

The Banyan tree, which belongs to the Mulberry family MORACEAE, produces figs about one-half to three-quarters of an inch in diameter. They grow in pairs, and ripen between February and May, becoming red. They are not edible. An average tree may produce thousands of figs each year.

The leaves are large — some-

times reaching a length of eleven inches and a width of five or six inches. Medium to dark green, shiny on the front and dull on the back, they have large, light green veins about one-half to one inch apart. There are many smaller veins closer together. When a leaf is pulled or broken from a branch, a white, milky, sticky substance (latex) comes out.

The tree has no flowers that are visible. There are small flowers, however, inside the figs. The blossoms are of both sexes. Wasps gain entrance through holes in the tips of the figs and lay eggs inside. Pollination occurs when the "fig insects" which hatch and mature, leave one fig and enter another.

The wood of the main trunk and of other well-developed secondary trunks is of little or no value commercially. The strong aerial roots,

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however, are sometimes used for cart yokes and tent poles. Aerial roots, before reaching the ground, have many strands at the lower end. These furnish coarse fibres for making rope. The latex is used in making rubber, and the twigs and leaves for fodder for elephants and cattle.

Banyan trees grow in at least sixteen tropical and semi-tropical countries around the world, within the limits of approximately thirty degrees north latitude and thirty degrees south latitude. In the United States they grow only in Florida and California (excepting perhaps rare specimens elsewhere) for ornamental purposes and shade. □

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