

# HONEYLOCUST GROWS RAPIDLY, PROVIDES OPEN SHADE FOR TURF

By Douglas Chapman, Horticulturist, Dow Gardens, Midland, MI

Thornless Honeylocust (*Gleditsia triacanthos* var. *inermis*) is a native tree that thrives in most urban conditions. Some have suggested it is over-used or a "weed tree," but if plantsmen and/or landscape architects keep in mind that no one species should comprise more than 5 percent of the trees in a landscape, then honeylocust is outstanding. It is native throughout much of the U.S. and exists as two specific types — one northern and another southern. This is of particular interest as the southern phenotypes will not harden off in the Northeast or Northern Midwest areas.

*Gleditsia triacanthos* var. *inermis* ranges in height from 30 to 70 feet with a spread of up to 80 feet in the landscape and 100 feet in the wild. The general habit is a broad oval. This tree has a fine texture and provides open shade under the canopy. This unique characteristic allows grass to thrive under it up to the trunk. The leaves are dark green throughout the summer and often develop an outstanding yellow fall color. The 7 to 8-inch reddish-brown seed pods develop with maturity. Some feel this is a problem, but I believe it is an aesthetic advantage. *Gleditsia t.i.* seed has been used as a cattle feed. Professor Joe McDaniels at the University of Illinois did some work in the '30's and '40's, developing outstanding high sugar varieties. In fact, one "tastes great." I am sure that interest again will develop in this plant as a source of cattle food.

Honeylocust is native to wet bottom lands or flood plains but is tolerant of droughty sites as well. It will grow in a wide range of soil pH, full sun and partial shade conditions, and is tolerant of chlorides (highway salts). In fact, it is so tolerant it has been grown quite successfully on Nantucket Island in Massachusetts. It

is tolerant of many air pollutants but has a slight susceptibility to sulfur dioxide. Honeylocust transplants readily, which is of great interest to landscapers.

The insect problems of significance include Honeylocust Pod Gall, Mimosa Webworm, spider mites, Tarnished Plant Bugs, and borers. Mimosa Webworm is the most devastating in Illinois and southern Ohio while Tarnished Plant Bug and Honeylocust Pod Gall are major concerns in Michigan and the Northeast. Diseases include powdery mildew, rust, Witches Broom, and cankers. Heartwood rot has been reported a problem on honeylocust, but, in fact, it is more significant with *Robinia*. One significant advantage of Thornless Honeylocust is that many cultivars have been developed or tailored for almost any landscape situation.

'Moraine' Honeylocust (*Gleditsia t.i.* 'Moraine') is the standard that most honeylocust varieties should be measured against. Its habit of growth is broad oval, almost graceful, 45 to 50 feet in height at maturity. This plant was introduced in 1949 by the Siebenthaler Nursery Company of Dayton, Ohio. It has been grown for many years and should be continued. It is resistant to Mimosa Webworm attack. 'Moraine' Honeylocust is an aggressive grower and one of the tallest cultivars introduced. It needs staking in the nursery until it reaches 1 to 1½ inches in trunk diameter. 'Moraine' Honeylocust is an outstanding street or large area landscape specimen tree.

'Imperial' Honeylocust (*Gleditsia t.i.* 'Imperial') has an ultimate height of 35 feet with an upright oval habit at maturity. It has a good central leader considering the honeylocust's habit of growth, especially its good branch structure of 70 to 80° angles. It grows compactly and does exceptionally under power lines, in out lawns, and in small area landscapes.

'Majestic' Honeylocust (*Gleditsia t.i.* 'Majestic') reaches a mature height of 45 to 55 feet. Its summer foliage is a rich, dark green. 'Majestic' maintains a central leader and needs little or no staking in the nursery. In some areas the fruit can be undesirable, but it can be an asset in the landscape.



**Moraine** is the standard that most honeylocust varieties are measured against (left).

**Sunburst's unique foliage** contrasts the dark green of older leaves with the yellow of new foliage (above).

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## HoneyLocust from page 23

'Skyline' Honeylocust (*Gleditsia t.i.* 'Sunburst') has a somewhat ascending to upright oval crown, reaching 45 to 50 feet in height. Staking is not required in the nursery. It does develop a good straight central leader. The leaves are a rich, dark green during the summer and develop an attractive yellow each fall. It is a good specimen for large areas or home landscape sites. It certainly ranks with 'Moraine' Honeylocust as one of the outstanding cultivars.

'Sunburst' Honeylocust (*Gleditsia t.i.* 'Sunburst') has an upright habit, reaching 40 feet at maturity. 'Sunburst's' foliage is unique. It has rich, dark green leaves on year-old wood, contrasted with outstanding yellow foliage on the current season's growth. To develop this color, one must encourage vigor. This means annual pruning after 10 to 15 years in the landscape to stimulate new growth. This annual pruning should be vigorous, almost attacking the tree with a "machete." 'Sunburst' does seem to attract more than its share of insect problems, specifically Honeylocust Pod Gall and mites, but if used sparingly in the landscape, it can be a unique addition.

Honeylocust is an outstanding urban tree. It has been overused, leading to increased reports of insect and disease problems. If not overused (diversity — no more than 5 percent of the same tree specimen in the community), insect and disease problems will not be significant. If overused, borers and many other problems will crop up. This did happen with 'Moraine' Honeylocust in the '60's, but with a shift of emphasis and more knowledgeable urban foresters, landscape architects, and horticulturists, this plant is again becoming a desirable tree for city streets, large area landscapes, parks, and home landscapes. Its ability to compete with turf, providing open shade and the fine texture make it outstanding. Its rapid rate of growth is certainly another desirable characteristic. In fact, it is not uncommon to see this vigorous tree grow 2 to 3 feet annually the first 10 years planted in the landscape. There have been some pest problems, but if our rule of diversity in any landscape is maintained, this tree has a place in difficult sites for most urban landscapes. **WTT**

## Athletic Field from page 22

acceptable program for overseeding permanent grasses might follow these steps:

1. Aerify heavily in late fall (four to six times) leaving holes open
2. Break up and drag in plugs next spring
3. Mow area close ( $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1 inch) and remove all debris
4. Scarify
5. Apply starter fertilizer at recommended rate
6. Seed at recommended rate
7. Apply light topdressing if possible
8. Drag lightly
9. Keep newly seeded area moist

These are general considerations. The methods should be adjusted to suit the level of maintenance desired, equipment available, and the present condition of the field. Program modifications for southern turf should include increases in fertilizer rates from 4 to 8 to 10 pounds of nitrogen per thousand square feet each growing season. Timing of the aerification and overseeding operations should be adjusted to the longer growing season. **WTT**