

MDC Celebrates 50 Years of Champion Trees

The Missouri Department of Conservation's (MDC) Champion Tree program is celebrating a half-century of tracking Missouri's biggest known trees. There are more than 130 species on the list, ranging from a scarlet oak stretching 15 stories tall to a winged sumac with a trunk just over three inches in diameter. While Missouri's champions might not compare to the giant redwoods out west, they include trees that are remarkable examples of the state's natural landscape.

In 1968, MDC first released a list of the biggest known trees throughout the state. The goal was to find the biggest specimens of Missouri's native trees, share them with the public, and encourage the hunt to continue.

"For 50 years, our Champion Tree Program has provided a showcase for some of Missouri's most impressive trees," said Missouri State Forester Lisa Allen. "Our champion trees can be found all over the state, in our backyards and farms, city parks, state parks, and conservation areas."

These big trees represent the great diversity of Missouri's trees. The state's biggest known sassafras resides in a city park in Monett. The current champion flowering dogwood, Missouri's official state tree, is on private property in Mississippi County. Many mid-Missourians are familiar with the centuries-old bur oak in McBaine, which has maintained its champion status for years. Among the many beautiful trees at Big Oak Tree State Park near East Prairie are three champions – the pumpkin ash, persimmon, and sweetgum.

"It might surprise you to know that none of the original trees listed in 1968 are still designated as champion trees," said Allen. "In fact, the list changes frequently, because people are finding new champions all the time. There are champions out there waiting to be discovered."

To celebrate the anniversary of the Missouri Champion Tree Program, MDC encourages Missourians to get outside this summer and discover big trees. Most champion trees are on private property, but MDC has assembled a list of 38 champion trees located on public land for adventure seekers to visit. That list is available at www.mdc.mo.gov/championtrees and includes a story map with photos.

"If there's not a champion tree near you, spending time around big trees is as easy as visiting a local conservation area or your city park," said Allen. "Getting outside is a great opportunity to explore, but it's also a great way to relax, unwind, and enjoy Missouri's trees and forests."

MDC uses a nationally-determined formula to measure champion trees, which assigns a point value to determine rank. Points are determined by a tree's height, crown spread, and trunk size. The formula adds the circumference in inches (measured from 4.5 feet from the ground) to the height in feet to one-fourth of the average crown spread. Check out a list of all current champions and the instructions for measuring trees at www.mdc.mo.gov/championtrees