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HOT

Blandy's Ginkgo Grove nears the golden hour

By TABITHA REEVES The Winchester Star
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Alex Grissom drove from Fredericksburg to Boyce on Thursday to view the Ginkgo Grove at Blandy Experimental Forest at the State Arboretum of Virginia, where the leaves have begun to change from green to yellow.

Jeff Taylor/The Winchester Star

BOYCE — One of the largest publicly-accessible ginkgo tree groves in the nation is nearing its seasonal golden glory, primed to welcome visitors from near and far in the coming days.

The fan-shaped ginkgo leaves at the State Arboretum of Virginia at Blandy Experimental Farm in Clarke County have begun to shift from green to gold, and they will likely reach peak color around Nov. 1, according to Blandy arborist Jared Manzo.

“It’ll be a stunning wall of yellow,” Manzo said. “... People flock out here, starting this week, heavily, for those photo opportunities and just a nice outdoor walk.”

With roughly 300 trees, neatly lined in rows across about 3.3 acres, the grove attracts thousands of eager leaf-peepers each fall who come to witness the uniform golden color, as well as learn a bit more about the ancient tree variety that many scientists describe as “a living fossil.”

This weekend and next — Oct. 26-27 and Nov. 2-3 — the Foundation of the State Arboretum is hosting special Ginkgo Gold weekends for sightseers for the first time.

“In the past, we’ve had people ask for extra services, like something to eat or extra bathrooms or souvenirs,” said Melanie Mullinax, the communications and event manager. “So this year, the Foundation of the State Arboretum is trying to meet those needs and requests of all the visitors out here. And we’re happy to do that.”

There will be food vendors with treats like doughnuts, ice cream and barbecue, as well as a souvenir stand with ginkgo merchandise, informational guides and more, said Mullinax.

Visitors will also be able to sponsor a ginkgo tree of their choosing. A metal tag, bearing a sponsor’s name or a memorial to a loved one, can be added to the selected tree. Each tag lasts five years and costs \$100, with the funds going to support the arboretum’s programming. Then, participants can check up on their tree any time of year either in-person or with Blandy’s online tree finder tool, according to Mullinax.

Based on prior years, Blandy is expecting between 5,000 and 8,000 people to stop by to see the trees over the next two weeks, Mullinax said. Travelers trek largely from nearby localities and the Washington, D.C., area, as well as up and down the East Coast.

The grove dates back to the 1930s, when the original director of Blandy, Dr. Orland White, set out to conduct an experiment.

“He had acres and acres of opportunity out here to try things,” Manzo said.

Ginkgos are dioecious trees, meaning that there are both female and male versions, said Manzo. But when the tree is at the seed stage, you cannot tell which are male and which are female, he explained.

So, White decided to spread lots of ginkgo seeds to find out what the ratio of male to female trees would be. According to Manzo, it ended up being about 50-50.

Even with the experiment over, the grove remained. Relatively few trees have been lost since the 1930s, Manzo noted. Ginkgos are known to thrive in all sorts of environments: hot or cold, dry or wet, urban streets or arboretums.

This summer's drought minimally impacted the ginkgos, Manzo said. He was initially concerned, since the dryness was paired with high temperatures and it was the second summer of little rainfall.

"They've been here for decades and have suffered whatever stressors and are pretty resilient to that," Manzo said. "They stand the test of time." Some ginkgos in Asia have been around for over a thousand years, he added.

According to Blandy's brochure on the Ginkgo Grove, the species was around during the time of the dinosaurs and it is the only survivor of a formerly diverse category of plants.

And depending on the environment, ginkgos can soar up to 100 feet high, with trunks about two feet in diameter.

The trees begin shedding their leaves in November's chill.

"Once we get some nights in the 20s, they are just raining leaves," Manzo said. "It's like they are throwing them off. It just rains leaves. It's kind of a neat thing."

It's a sight worth witnessing, he said.

"At some point, what's above is then across the ground and you have yellow at your feet, rather than up in the sky," Manzo said. "...Then, the ground kind of glows."

Blandy is located at 400 Blandy Farm Lane, Boyce. It's open from dawn to dusk. To learn more, visit blandy.virginia.edu.

Tabitha Reeves