Honey locust seedlings

Blackford Valley Farm | Planting guide

Honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) is a fast-growing native tree with fine-textured leaves, an open canopy, and potentially sweet-pulped pods used by wildlife and livestock. It is **not black locust** (*Robinia pseudoacacia*). These seedlings are not copies of thornless or podless landscape cultivars: thorn development, pod quality, crop size, and drop timing vary.

Choose the site carefully

- **Space and light:** Plan for a large spreading tree, potentially 60-80 feet tall and wide. Choose full sun and ample crown space away from power lines and buildings. Light shade beneath an open crown may suit some pasture layouts, but competing roots and growing shade can still affect the understory.
- **Soil and pH:** Prefer fertile, **moist but well-drained soil**. NC State describes broad acid-through-alkaline adaptability, including clay where roots remain aerated; USDA also notes limestone-upland adaptability. No narrow numerical pH optimum is established here, and tolerance does not promise optimum pod production. Test before amendments; unusually basic soil can limit nutrient availability.
- **Moisture and roots:** USDA reports flood tolerance and established drought resistance, but does not specify a safe flood duration; honey locust is not a permanent swamp tree. Roots can explore deeper soil where it is penetrable and aerated, but deep rooting is **conditional, not universal**. Shallow rock, hardpan, compaction, or a high water table can keep roots shallower and more lateral. Do not count on a tree to reach groundwater or tolerate permanent saturation.
- **Safety:** Seedlings may develop large, branched thorns on trunks and limbs. Keep them out of play areas, frequently traveled paths, livestock handling areas, and places where thorns could injure people or animals or puncture tires. A thornless seed parent does not guarantee thornless offspring.

Plant your potted seedling

We sell and recommend **potted seedlings**. Our planting method requires a **square hole, not a round one**. A wider hole is preferred, not required; it must fit the root ball without squeezing it. Dig no deeper than the root ball in its pot, and shallower as needed to leave the **top of the root ball slightly above surrounding ground level**. Rest it on firm soil so it does not settle too deep. Water the pot before removal; support the root ball, not the stem, and keep it together. Check for circling roots rather than forcing a root-bound ball into the hole. Backfill around the sides with native soil, taper soil to cover exposed side roots, and water thoroughly. Keep the root flare exposed; do not pile soil or mulch over the ball's top or against the trunk. Check both the root ball and nearby soil for moisture while roots establish.

Plant in spring when soil is workable, not waterlogged. Do not add fertilizer to the hole.

Protect young trees

Use a tall cage with a fine-mesh lower guard or a securely staked, ventilated tube against deer, rabbits, mice, and voles. Check for tunneling, chewing, and guard constriction. A standard tube is not sufficient where cattle or other large livestock can reach the plant: use an effective livestock exclusion fence. Keep a weed-free ring, mulch off the trunk, and prevent mower and string-trimmer wounds.

Water and maintain

Check beneath mulch frequently during the first growing seasons. Water slowly when the planted root zone begins drying, moistening roots and surrounding soil, then allow excess to drain. Drought tolerance after establishment does not protect a new seedling. Mature trees generally need less supplemental water, but prolonged drought can

limit growth and pod development. Persistent waterlogging can deprive roots of oxygen, favor root rot, and cause decline or death.

Train a sound trunk and well-spaced branches while young; remove damaged wood and inspect for cankers and dieback. NC State lists canker, leaf spot, rust, and several insect pests; adaptable does not mean disease-proof. Diagnose symptoms before treatment. Watch for volunteer seedlings and sprouts: honey locust can become a pasture weed, and cutting or mowing can stimulate sprouting. Plan follow-up control rather than letting a pod planting become an unmanaged thicket.

Pods and pollination

Pods form from pollinated female flowers; plant a group rather than relying on one unsexed seedling for a crop. Flowering and pod production must be observed as trees mature. Do not promise that every tree will bear pods, be thornless, or match a selected high-sugar parent. Fertile, drained soil with adequate moisture supports canopy and pod development, but flowering, pollen, climate, and genetics still determine the crop. Discuss safe pod use and livestock access with an Extension or livestock adviser; pods are supplemental food, not a complete feed ration.

Interpret the soil map

Use the soil-location map to screen survey pH layers, drainage, water storage, and rooting restrictions where recorded. Survey estimates are not a soil test or field inspection. Verify actual depth and seasonal wetness and test before amendments. The map does not measure current moisture or predict pod yield.

Research sources

- NC State Extension: honey locust soils, established drought tolerance, thorns, pods, and pests
- USDA: honey-locust plant guide, limestone uplands, flood tolerance, and drought resistance
- The Morton Arboretum: honey locust site preference and thorn cautions
- NC State Extension: soil depth, root restrictions, pH, and nutrient availability
- NC State Extension: planting practices for fruit and nut trees
- University of Minnesota Extension: establishment watering and mulch