

The Sycamore...

Genus: *Plantanus*

Specific epithet: *occidentalis*

Family: *Platanaceae*

Species age: 100 million years

The sycamore tree grows in the eastern half of the united states, extending from Maine to Georgia in the north/south direction and as far west as Texas¹. It also grows in areas of Canada.

Sycamore trees are large and have crowns that are usually wider at the base and slowly taper towards the top, producing a nice-looking tree. Often they are found growing in the flood zone of a river or in other damp areas. Because the trees live to an old age, often over 250 years, many times an old one can be seen leaning heavily towards a river's bank due to erosion.

The easiest way to spot a sycamore tree is by its distinctive bark, which is flaky and multi-colored. Many describe the visible layer under the flaking bark as having a "camouflage" appearance. New stem growth mostly lacks this camouflage and is a greyish green.



Image Source: carrborocitizen.com

Another strong indicator of the tree's identity is its distinctive seed cluster, which looks like a "fuzzy ball." Technically this structure is a large cluster of individual achenes², each of which is surrounded by a tuft of hair to carry it by wind to its destination. These structures start life out as a flower cluster, which blooms between March and May, depending on location².

The leaves of the sycamore tree are less distinctive than its other characteristics, because they look very similar to a maple leaf. They feature toothed protrusions which extend from what are arguably 3 main lobes. Most sycamore leaves are much larger in size than a maple leaf, however.

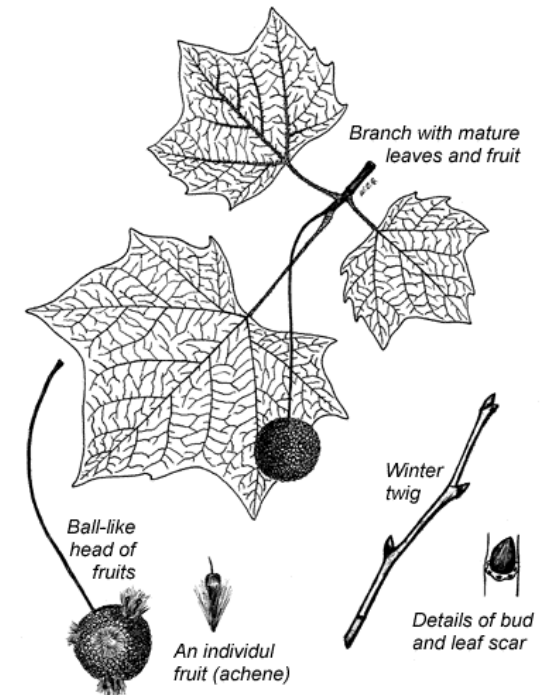


Image source: Clemson.edu

Occasionally these leaves are affected by a fungus known as anthracnose, which causes them to brown, wither, and die. The trees are also affected by cankers, which restrict nutrient and water flow.

Sycamore trees have a distinctively white wood which is very hard and durable, and which lends it to a large number of uses. Native Americans once used the huge

Sycamore Tree

Platanus Occidentalis



trunks of sycamore trees to make dugout canoes over 60 feet long⁴. Today sycamore is used primarily in furniture making and in the shipping industry via pallets and crates. It has a very unique grain quality which makes splitting it very difficult. Because of this it has a special place in making butcher's blocks and other types of cutting stands³.

Sycamore are the largest trees I have found in Ohio. This is a picture I have taken of a tree verified as over 300 years old, about half of the maximum age for a sycamore.



Sources:

1. http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/silvics_manual/volume_2/platanus/occidentalis.htm
2. http://www.clemson.edu/extension/natural_resources/landowner/youth_environ_education/images/platanus_occidentalis.html
3. http://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/cs_ploc.pdf
4. <http://searchinghistoricalhorizons.wordpress.com/2011-08/25/the-sycamore-tree-and-trinity-root-september-11-2001/>