

# Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson  
Pocahontas County Naturalist



January 11, 2017

“How high will the sycamore grow?  
If you cut it down, then you’ll never know.”

These memorable lines by Vanessa L. Williams from the *Pocahontas* song “Colors of the Wind” will introduce our first plant friend of 2017 – the sycamore tree.

The American Planetree or Sycamore, *Platanus occidentalis*, is a large deciduous tree found along streams and rivers throughout the eastern United States. In fact, with average heights and spreads of 70-100 feet and trunk diameters of 3-8 feet, it is considered the most massive tree native to Eastern North America. While fast growers, sycamores are often long-lived as well and may reach 350 years in age. Did you know the largest sycamore on record grew to a height of 167 feet with a trunk diameter width of 13 feet?

European settlers first gave the tree the common name of sycamore because its leaves looked like those of the British sycamore tree, which is actually in the maple family. Sycamore leaves do resemble large maple leaves, measuring 4-10 inches in width, with 3-5 lobes and coarse marginal teeth. Sycamores flower in April, and over the summer the female flowers become fuzzy, long-stalked fruiting balls. These buttonballs, another common name for the tree, ripen in October and persist into early winter, hanging from the twig tips like a tree decorated for Christmas.

But perhaps the sycamore’s most unusual feature is its exfoliating bark. Like us, trees grow out as well as up, and their bark has to yield to the growing trunk by stretching, splitting, or infilling. Sycamore bark, however, is very rigid and lacks elasticity and so simply sloughs off the tree in great chunks, revealing the creamy white inner bark that results in its signature mottled appearance.

The trunks of sycamores are often hollow. Native Americans built dugout canoes from their trunks, and they make excellent cavity trees for mammals and wood ducks. Sycamore lumber is also used in making furniture, barrels, crates, and butcher blocks.

Anthracnose, a common fungal disease of shade trees, often completely defoliates sycamore trees, making them unsightly as specimen trees. As a result, the American Sycamore is often avoided as a landscape tree and the London Planetree, a cross between the American Sycamore and Oriental Planetree, is planted instead. Like sycamores, this hybrid is tolerant of air pollution and root compaction but is also resistant to Sycamore Anthracnose. Bloodgood London Planetree, one of the first cultivars with anthracnose resistance, is offered on our annual spring tree sale. Two local specimens may be viewed at the Pocahontas Manor.

I’ll close with more memorable song lines, this time from “Dream a Little Dream of Me.” Penned by Gus Kahn and first recorded in 1931, the version I find myself humming and whistling during tree season is from a 1968 recording by The Mamas & the Papas.

“Stars shining bright above you.  
Night breezes seem to whisper ‘I love you.’  
Birds singing in a sycamore tree.  
Dream a little dream of me.”

