

# Maine Tree Species Fact Sheet

**Common Name:** American Sycamore (Buttonwood, American Planetree, Buttonball-tree)

**Botanical Name:** *Platanus occidentalis*

**Tree Type:** Deciduous

## **Physical Description:**

**Growth Habit:** American sycamore is a fast-growing and long-lived tree. It is one of the largest species in the eastern deciduous forests. Wherever the soil is moist and fertile, along streams, in river bottoms, and in low, damp woods it is likely to be found. The bark on the trunk and limbs is greenish-gray in color and flakes off in broad scales exposing white patches beneath. The twigs are zigzag in shape, rather stout, somewhat shiny, and green and fuzzy when young. Mature twigs are gray or brownish and smooth. The winter buds have a single, wrinkled cap-like scale. The leaves are simple, alternate, 4 to 10 inches across, 3-5 lobed, light green above and white woolly below. The base of the leaf-stalk is hollow and swollen and covers the winter bud.

**Height:** The American sycamore reaches a height of 75 –100 feet with a similar or greater spread. In Maine it does not attain a great size. This species is hardy to Zone 4.

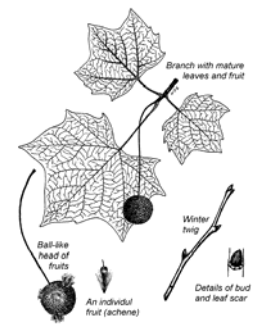
**Shape:** American sycamore is usually a tree with a large, massive trunk. The trunk may spread near the ground into several large, secondary limbs, or it may rise without branching for a considerable distance and then have large, spreading branches.

## **Fruit/Seed Description/Dispersal Methods:**

American sycamore is monoecious. The male flower clusters grow on short stalks on branchlets of the previous year and the female flower clusters grow on short stalks on older branchlets. They appear in May. The fruit head generally occurs singly and is borne on a long stem. It is in the shape of a ball of about one inch in diameter. It contains many small wedge or shoenail-shaped nutlets, each furnished with a long tuft of hairs. The fruit usually remains on the tree until spring.

## **Range within Maine:**

American sycamore occurs rarely on the borders of streams and rich bottomlands in York, Cumberland and southern Franklin Counties.



## **Distinguishing Features:**

The distinguishing features of this species include the whitish to greenish under-bark on the upper trunk and limbs; the white woolliness on the underside of the leaves; and the pebbly-grained, brown ball fruit.

## **Interesting Features:**

The wood of the American sycamore is hard, firm, and very perishable when exposed to the weather, and liable to warp. It is used for furniture, butchers' blocks, crates, and the interior finish of houses.

## **Relationship to Wildlife:**

Several birds feed on the seeds of the American sycamore.

## **Landscape Use:**

This species is too large to plant in the home landscape and is constantly dropping leaves, twigs and fruits.

## **Common Problems or Pests of the Tree in Maine:**

American sycamore is susceptible to anthracnose, leafspots, aphids, sycamore plant bug, sycamore tussock moth, scales, bagworm, and borers.

## **References:**

*Forest Trees of Maine. Twelfth Edition.* Maine Forest Service/Department of Conservation. 1995.

*Know Your Trees.* Cope, J.A. and F.E. Winch. Cornell Cooperative Extension. 1992.

*Manual of Woody Landscape Plants, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition.* Dirr, Michael A. Publishing L.L.C. 1998.

*United States Dept. of Agriculture: Silvics of North America:*

[http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/silvics\\_manual/volume\\_2/platanus/occidentalis.htm](http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/silvics_manual/volume_2/platanus/occidentalis.htm)

