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American Sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*), Nebraska Forest Service

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American Sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*)
Nebraska Forest Service

A tree that can warm your heart even on the coldest day of winter is the American sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*). American sycamore is also known as American planetree, buttonwood and buttonball tree. American sycamore is native in 36 states including Nebraska. You can go to just about any eastern Nebraska community and find at least a few larger sycamore trees. On farms it was (and still is) often planted for shade.

Sycamore is a massive tree with spreading branches. In southern Ohio the story is often told of a group of horsemen who found shelter during a severe storm in the hollow base of an old sycamore. They were able to shelter not only themselves but also their horses.

The leaf of the sycamore is alternate, simple and palmately veined which means that the veins in the leaf radiate out from a single point. It is a large leaf with three to five lobes. The leaf edges are like saw teeth and the underside of the leaf is pubescent or fuzzy. If you have a sycamore in your yard you know that it is a real chore to rake up the large leaves in the fall.

Sycamore is monoecious; both male and female flowers occurring on the same tree. The flower is not very showy and you may not even know it is there. Flowers appear in May. The fruit is a ball composed of many closely packed, long, narrow fruits that ripen by September or October and often remain on the tree over winter, breaking up or falling off the following spring. As the seed balls break up, the seeds are released and float down slowly. The hairs act as parachutes, and the seeds are widely scattered by the wind. Several birds feed on the seeds and also may disseminate them to a minor extent. The fruit is sometimes collected in the fall and spray painted silver or gold for use as Christmas decorations.

The twig has a zigzag sort of pattern and is orange-brown in color. The bark is the more outstanding characteristic of the tree. It is a thin bark that is mottled brown, green and white. Some people refer to it as a ‘camouflage’ bark. The bark is exfoliating which means that it sheds regularly.

While some may consider the sycamore to be a ‘dirty’ tree, it remains as a good, solid shade tree. Its large spreading form is ideal for larger homes and farm properties. Never plant this tree in small spaces. The large leaves give the tree a very full appearance and the bark provides some excellent winter views in an otherwise dull landscape. The tree is susceptible to anthracnose, a common leaf disease. Anthracnose can be controlled by spraying the tree at bud break but it is usually better just to let the tree handle the problem on its own. Anthracnose may cause leaves to fall off of the tree in May or early June but new leaves will redevelop soon after that.

Sycamore is valuable as a timber tree in parts of the country that are more heavily forested. Its wood is hard with a twisted, coarse grain. It is used for furniture, interior trim, boxes, pulpwood, and particleboard.

The tree is also planted to benefit wildlife. Several wild birds including purple finch, goldfinch, chickadees, and dark-eyed junco eat the seeds. Larger trees in forested areas make excellent nesting habitat for birds including wood ducks.

Sycamore is usually found in the rich bottomland soils associated with rivers and streams. It likes a well-drained soil but will also do well in Nebraska clay soils.