

Kentucky Big Tree Program

What's Brown and White and Flaky All Over? American Sycamore

By *Diana Olszowy*

Our native Sycamore is a common yet distinctive sight in both natural and planted landscapes. Its bark—a “camouflage” pattern of peeling patches like tan, gray, and brown puzzle pieces—eventually turns to a smooth white on the mature trunk and upper branches.

Sycamores hold the record for the broadest trunk of a native tree in the eastern United States, averaging over 10 feet in diameter and 80 feet tall. Kentucky just happens to have the largest known specimen and the current national champion growing in Montgomery County. This champ measures a whopping 35 feet in circumference and 62 feet in height, and it has an average spread of over 82 feet. It is entirely hollow but is so massive that it can provide shelter from rain for at least a dozen people at one time.

Sycamores prefer growing in rich, well-drained soils along streams and rivers. They grow quickly and can live for hundreds of years. This champ has no living interior wood, so it has no rings to count, which makes estimating its age very difficult. But you could safely say that it has to be several hundred years old since its largest neighbors are approximately 100 years old.

The wood of Sycamore is moderately hard, heavy, strong, and resistant to shock. It is not durable and should not be used where it is exposed to moisture or conditions favoring decay. The primary uses are for veneer, boxes, flooring, pallets, crates, and butcher blocks because it is very difficult to split. Sycamores bear large, coarse leaves resembling maples in shape and make excellent shade trees

for urban settings. They are also planted as park trees because of their fast growth, handsome appearance, and ability to withstand winds. Due to their large size and habit of shedding leaves, seed balls, and bark, Sycamores are best suited for use in large landscapes. Sycamores tolerate compacted soil and air pollution and can withstand heavy pruning. They are, however, bothered by several insects and fungus diseases, which may weaken trees but rarely kill them.

The major disadvantage of Sycamore as a landscape tree is the fungal disease anthracnose. The extent and severity of the disease varies with the spring weather; the cooler and wetter springs usually are associated with increased anthracnose activity. The disease causes deformity of the leaves, twigs, and buds but is seldom fatal since anthracnose attacks only the current year's growth.

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