

# Technical Report



## Wetland Flora

No. 94-1 / January 1994

Gene Silberhorn

### Sycamore

*Platanus occidentalis* L.

#### Growth Habit and Diagnostic Characteristics

Sycamore is a large tree (50 meters tall) with creamy-white bark when immature, becoming brown, and later mottled as the platelike outer bark exfoliates. Older bark, near the base of the trunk, remains brown, somewhat furrowed and scaly. Bark on the upper two thirds of the trunk and spreading branches is usually white. Trees, 100 years old or more, often have brownish, scaly bark extending far up into the upper branches. In the south, these trees can grow to great age, 500 years or more, with commanding height and crown. Old trees often have hollow trunks and branch cavities that offer shelter for birds, opossum and raccoon.

Leaves are simple, alternate, deciduous, palmately lobed with coarse, large teeth or serrations. The leaves resemble maple leaves except they are much larger, up to 25 cm (10 in.) wide and long. Petioles are long with enlarged bases that have leaf-like, toothed or lobed stipules which often exfoliate during late summer. The swollen petiole base completely surrounds the lateral bud. A diagnostic characteristic in winter is the circular leaf scar left by the fallen leaf. In the spring, *Platanus occidentalis* develops small globose flowering heads. After fertilization, brown, long stalked ball-shaped fruits are evident.

No other forest tree in eastern North America can be confused with sycamore because of its collective diagnostic features such as: the distinctive bark, large palmately lobed leaves, minutely bristled spherical fruits, and circular leaf scars.

#### Distribution

Sycamore is commonly found in riverine, bottomland habitats throughout much of eastern United States.

#### Habitat

Sycamore is most often found along streams and rivers, edges of ponds and lakes, or even in low bottomland forests. *Platanus* typically co-occur with red maple (*Acer rubrum*) (Wetland Flora, no.91-7, July 1991), river birch (*Betula nigra*), green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*) and black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica* var. *biflora*) in saturated palustrine wooded wetlands. In bottomland forests (usually found along blackwater rivers), sycamore occasionally occurs with bald cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) (Wetland Flora, no. 93-7, July 1993) and water tupelo (*Nyssa aquatica*). In these semipermanently flooded wetlands, sycamore only occurs on higher hummocks within the swamp. *Platanus occidentalis* also grows in nonwetland situations and is planted as an attractive shade tree.

#### Ecological Value/Benefits

Hollows in the trunks and branches of this tree provide shelter for raccoons and opossums. Small holes and cavities in the upper branches are occasionally occupied by wood ducks. The tiny bristle-like seeds of the ball-like fruit are food for small birds such as purple finches.

Songbird populations have been in serious decline in recent years, due primarily to habitat loss such as wooded uplands. Wooded wetlands that have not been recently cut for timber or impacted by development are becoming surrogate sanctuaries for migrating songbirds.

#### Hydrophytic Factor/Wetland Indicator Status

As reported in the *National List of Plant Species that Occur in Wetlands: Virginia (1988)*, *Platanus occidentalis* is classified as a **facultative wetland plant (FACW)**. FACW plants "usually occur in wetlands (estimated probability 67%-99%)."

*Platanus occidentalis* L.

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