

VNPS Piedmont Chapter WILDFLOWER of the WEEK

WILDFLOWER #97 answer: AMERICAN SYCAMORE (*Platanus occidentalis*)

Sycamore's history reaches back to the age of the dinosaurs. Imprints of fruits and leaves lie next to dinosaur tracks in fossilized mud.

Sycamore is versatile. It can form dense stands as a pioneer on upland sites; it has some salt tolerance by the sea, and it lines city streets. But it thrives best in floodplains and along streams and rivers, if spring floods are not prolonged. There it can grow to 100 feet and taller.

The mottled bark sheds puzzle pieces to reveal white bark gleaming underneath. Older trunks might turn a scaly gray, so to be sure what that big tree is on the riverbank, check the smaller branches.

Also distinctive are the large, alternate, palmate lobed leaves. They have two kinds of hairs: one long, branched, and starry; the other a short brownish glandular fuzz. The swollen petioles hide lateral buds. Leafy stipules often persist into summer, forming a cup whose scar later encircles the twig.

Wind showers copious pollen from male flower clusters (red) onto female clusters (green) in the spring. Hard fruiting heads—"sycamore balls"—form, dangling all winter, held fast by strong bast fibers. By late winter the balls soften, dissolving into one-seeded plumed fruits. Birds like chickadees, juncos, and finches prize this food, once a favorite of the now-extinct Carolina parakeet.

As sycamore ages, a fungus consumes the heartwood. The hollow trunk becomes home to cavity-nesting wood ducks and barred owls, flying squirrels, and even bears. Audubon saw thousands of chimney swifts pour into a sycamore. European pioneers too sheltered livestock and even whole families inside an ancient giant's trunk.

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Clues: This member of the buttercups is a soft-haired surprise in the cold woods.



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