

AMERICAN SYCAMORE

Plantanus occidentalis

American Sycamore is one of the largest of eastern hardwood trees. This large massive tree is typically found growing on stream banks and floodplains attaining heights of 70-120 feet or more. Also called buttonwood or American planetree, the wood is used for furniture, butcher blocks and flooring. The tree is sometimes referred to as the ghost tree because of its mottled white bark. This bark is a key characteristic of this species, consisting of two layers; the outer peeling in brown flakes and the inner which is whitish or yellow green. With some imagination, the bark appears to have a camouflage pattern similar to military uniforms or equipment. The leaves are very large and broad, sometimes 7", with 3-5 lobes, many teeth, and are drab green. The leaves are oddly floppy with assorted sizes and angles, some even twisted upside down and showing different colors. Another noticeable characteristic is the fruit which are known as buttonballs. Each buttonball is about 1 inch in diameter and consists of many seeds that are dispersed by the wind when the fruits mature and fall apart. The London Planetree, a hybrid of American Sycamore and the Oriental Plane, is similar in appearance. An easy trick in identifying the difference between the two species is by looking for the number of buttonballs found on the trees. London Planetrees have a pair of buttonballs hanging together while the American Sycamore has a singular buttonball. This specie is truly a magnificent tree to see.

There is only one mature American Sycamore at the cemetery. It is located on Mt. Laurel Ave. slightly down the hill from the chapel and the Atkin's mausoleum, and one road over from its hybrid cousins, the London Planetrees. It's trunk is misshapen and gnarled making it difficult to see its patchy, spotted coloring. In mid August, it like the London Planetrees, sheds its outer bark in long strips revealing an inner greenish yellow bark. Only single buttonballs are seen on the lower limbs of the tree at the Baber Cemetery; but because of the height of its upper limbs, it is difficult to determine whether it is an American Sycamore with single buttonballs or a London Planetree that may have lost one of its pairs of buttonballs.

