

# Sycamore



Our late-lamented friend and neighbour, John Wallace, used to come into our house and make straight for the sitting room window. He would stand and look for a few moments and then say, in his lovely lilting Irish brogue, ‘That’s a wonderful tree.’ And we would stand beside him and share that special moment. It was always the same. The beauty of that massive ancient sycamore tree never waned. Each time he looked at it, it was always as if for the very first time, as if its magnificence had caught him newly unawares.

It is still the same. When we open our curtains each morning that tree is the first thing we see, and although John is no longer there beside us, it feels as if he is. Even if, in winter, it is still dark when we look out to a new day, that tree is still discernible as a kind of penumbra, outwitting the darkest night, a stable, reassuring presence. It’s there too when the first hint of daylight begins to touch its uppermost reaches.

I sometimes think this tree is at its best in winter, for it is then, when it has taken all its clothes off, that you can see the full wonder of intricate architecture, every tendril perfectly designed to reach upwards and outwards to maximise its exposure to sunlight. When the moon is full, and almost at the end of its nightly journey, it hangs behind this naked tree like a huge Chinese lantern criss-crossed by a filigree of bare twigs and branches. I don’t know how old this particular specimen is, but I do know that sycamores can live for several hundred years and I suspect this beauty, judging by its height, girth and demeanour, is at least 100.

At this very moment as I write it is the dominant feature of a black and white landscape. Above is the creamy white of stratus clouds, below is the pure crystalline white of fine-driven snow and caught between the two are the black skeletal frameworks of smaller trees and hedgerow shrubs. The trunk of this tree is slightly spiralled as if frozen in the performance of a twirling dance, spiralling its way into heaven.

An early morning heron occasionally stands spookily still under this tree, ready to pounce on some unsuspecting rodent; a family of three deer regularly graze in its shade; at dusk a barn owl swoops round it, and a fox slinks past. Sheep, too, sometimes seek shelter from harsh winds in its lee and on hot days gather under its shade. Charlie the pheasant always begins to strut his stuff under it when the time comes around once more for him to perpetuate his dynasty. It's also a favourite gathering place for the local gang of hooligan starlings, and the only less boisterous rooks. Apparently, sycamore is used in the making of fiddles and other stringed instruments.

The sycamore's sturdy twigs will soon begin to fill out with its pairs of plump buds, followed by its large-lobed and slightly serrated leaves. You don't need to worry about the black spots that occur on the leaves. This is caused by the Tar-spot Fungus, *Rhytisma acerinum*, which doesn't cause much harm to the tree. In fact, we should be very pleased when we see it because this fungus only seems to thrive where the air is pure. You don't see it in cities, where the fungus is poisoned off by all the sulphur dioxide in the air.

Towards the end of the year this tree becomes a bit of a nuisance. It insists on dispersing its helicopter seeds over as wide an area as possible, and this includes our garden. So at the beginning of every gardening year we are constantly seeking out and destroying its offspring before they take over completely. It's a unique feature of sycamore trees that their seed leaves are bright green before they are exposed to sunlight.

I have never known whether to refer to this tree as he or she, for I always reckoned it needed some kind of personification. That was, however, until I discovered it is a hermaphrodite. Some of its hanging clusters of flowers are male, others are female and yet more, especially at the tip, are sterile. Bees, however, will soon seek these flowers out for they are rich in nectar.

There seems to be some confusion about the name of this tree. Botanically speaking, it is a maple, hence its name *Acer psuedoplatanus*. However, it was given the name *Sycamore* because, when it was first brought to this country sometime in the Middle Ages, it was thought to be synonymous with the *sycomorus* or *fig-mulberry*, whose leaves are like those of the mulberry mentioned in the Bible. The mistake lies in mistaking the sycamore fig, *Ficus sycomorus*, spelled with an 'o', with the *sycamore*, with an 'a'! In the second book of Samuel, which tells the story of David's on-going fight with the Philistines, David wasn't quite sure how best to rout his enemies, so he asked God, who told him that his best tactic would be to come up against his enemies 'over against the mulberry trees'. Mind you, that's the story in the Authorised Version of the Bible; in the Revised Standard version they have become 'balsam trees'. For a field commander in the heat of battle, that must have been very confusing advice, as I doubt whether David had his RHS encyclopaedia of plants with him. To add to the muddle over names, in Scotland this tree is considered to be a plane tree, which accounts for the 'platanus' bit of its botanical name.

Whatever the confusion over this tree's identity, of one thing we can be sure. In this angst-ridden, topsy-turvy world that we seem to have created for ourselves through carelessness, the *Acer psuedoplatanus* over our garden fence stands as a reassuring symbol of certainty and predictability in a very uncertain world. It stands as a promise that some things, at least, can be relied on. It reigns supreme over this particular corner of the world, entirely untouched by our pandemic.

Clive Wilkinson  
February 2021

