

### Tree of the month - Sycamore - *Acer pseudoplatanus*

Last month here in Dorset the annual Tolpuddle Martyrs' Festival took place, celebrating the formation of the first Trade Union in 1834. Six farm labourers met under a sycamore tree on the village green in Tolpuddle to form a society to fight the poverty wages and harsh working conditions of the time. For this act of defiance, they were arrested and sentenced to seven years' transportation, but the subsequent outcry and the mass workers' protest led to them receiving a free pardon. The venerable sycamore tree beneath which they stood, now known as the Martyrs' Tree, is still standing on the tiny village green in Tolpuddle, and is both the largest sycamore in Dorset and one of the smallest properties under the protection of the National Trust. Aside from this national monument of a tree, however, the sycamore has been both cultivated and reviled at different times since it was introduced to Britain, probably around 1500.



The names of the sycamore all derive from its similarity of leaf-shape to other trees. The common name was originally 'sycamore', probably from confusion with the fig tree *Ficus sycomorus*. The Latin name *A. pseudoplatanus* translates as 'false plane maple', and the tree, which is a member of the maple family, has been known variously as the great maple, and, mostly in Scotland, as the great plane tree. To add to the confusion, in America plane trees are known as sycamore! Thank goodness for Latin names to bring a little clarity.

The sycamore was probably introduced to Britain as an exotic import in the sixteenth century, and was initially an uncommon exotic. It was noted in Gerard's *Herball* of 1633 that sycamores were planted to grace the 'walkes and places of pleasure of noble men, where it especially is planted for the shadowe sake'. Although sycamores do cast deep shade, the reference to 'shadowe' probably indicates the confusion that existed at the time with *F. sycomorus*, which was commonly planted as a shade tree in its native Middle East.

Once established in Britain, the sycamore spread rapidly across the country, proving to be hardy in almost all habitats and soil types. It is a hardwood tree almost uniquely resistant to salt spray, and so was often planted round exposed and coastal homesteads, especially in Scotland where it was valued both as a windbreak, and for cooling shade for the dairy. Widespread planting in the eighteenth century established a large population of sycamore in Britain, and it proved to be a rampant coloniser, its prolific 'helicopter' seeds spreading and

growing freely to the extent that for many years now it has been regarded as a weed tree, but the tide is turning; Although the tree is still unpopular in towns for its slippery leaves and honeydew that marks cars parked beneath, and equally unpopular with some rural conservationists, some redeeming features have been found. Many still fight the invasion of ancient woodlands by this muscular invader, but it has now been discovered that the plentiful fallen sycamore leaves decay quickly and actually help to build a healthy soil by encouraging earthworms; furthermore, many flower species associated with ancient woodland will also thrive under a canopy of sycamore; and finally that the huge number of aphids supported by each sycamore tree are a valuable food source for insect-eating birds, especially in the challenging habitat of the town.

As the sycamore is a fast-growing hardwood, it can be coppiced on a short rotation for carving, turning and working. It is favoured today for kitchen tables, rolling pins and wooden spoons for the same reason as it was used historically for turning bowls and skimmers for use in the dairy; the wood is fine-grained and easy to clean, and carries no taint. It will also stand up to the daily scrubbing and washing necessary in the dairy, or the kitchen. The wood also continues to be favoured by turners for bowl-making, as it is fine-grained, easy to work, and does not warp, although the hard, creamy-coloured timber is not as interestingly-grained as other woods.

Finally, there is a fascinating West Country tradition that I have read about, but not yet seen or tried, whereby sycamore leaves are used to bake Easter 'revel cakes'. These are baked sitting on the leaves, which leave a clear leaf print on the bottom of the cake. In some areas the leaves are also associated with the baking of harvest cakes, which were taken out to the harvesters in the fields. An old version of the new, ecological, biodegradable plates, perhaps!

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