Last year I declared I could never love any other tree as much as a sugar maple. After accepting a several-month ecology internship in Montpellier, France, I bid a teary adieu to the stunning October foliage around my Hudson Valley home. Then I stepped off the airplane into a new world of dusky gray and gnarled Mediterranean greens. Ancient olive trees stand like statues in the roundabouts; streets are dotted with palms, cypresses, and occasional figs; tightly-pruned planetrees line esplanades and bike paths alike. There is no maple syrup here.

On my first day at work, I climbed a rickety external staircase to the third floor, and with some confusion saw samaras waving from an unfamiliar tree growing alongside the stairs. Paired samaras (one-seeded fruits with papery wings) are characteristic of the maples (Acer), a group of plants I had worked with as a horticultural intern at the Arboretum last year. During my internship I had puzzled over hawthorn maple (A. crataegifolium) and communed with paperbark maple (A. griseum), but had never taken time to get to know the species that I now greeted with great glee. It was not a sugar maple, but instead the aptly-named Montpellier maple, Acer monspessulanum.

After my joy at finding a local maple subsided, I had to admit that the Montpellier maple is not a particularly elegant tree. It is sometimes referred to as a shrub (arbuste in French), with an average height of only 15 to 25 feet (4.6 to 7.6 meters). Its slow growth and small trunk, frequently branched into several stems, give it a craggy feel characteristic of many Mediterranean region trees. Montpellier maple's leathery three-lobed leaves are rounded and smooth-edged, are borne on long petioles, and are only 1.5 to 2.75 inches (4 to 7 centimeters) wide and 1.25 to 2 inches (3 to 5 centimeters) long. By mid-November the morning chill in Montpellier had become crisper; the endearing leaves of the tree I pass each morning turned first yellow then red. Finally brown, they fell and were scattered through the halls by passing boots.

In the spring, Montpellier maple bears small, bright greenish yellow flowers that open earlier than its leaves, followed by the parallel-winged samaras frequently tinted pink or red and maturing to tan. This drought-tolerant species handles occasional cold and persists in USDA hardiness zones 5 to 9 (average annual minimum temperatures -20 to 30°F [-29 to -1°C]; Montpellier has a Zone 9 climate). Montpellier maple is shade intolerant, so should not be sited near faster growing species. It thrives in alkaline and nutrient poor soils; on a recent hike in the Cévennes I found A. monspessulanum growing on limestone bluffs near a holly oak (Quercus ilex) and the scrub mountain pine (Pinus mugo).

Montpellier maple has a wide native range and corresponding variability in form. Taxonomy resource The Plant List reports five accepted subspecies—cinerascens, ibericum, persicum, turcomanicum, and microphyllum; the latter, found in Turkey, Lebanon, and Syria, has very small leaves, just 1.25 inches (3 centimeters) maximum width. Including all subspecies, Acer monspessulanum spreads across southern Europe from Portugal to Romania and across Northern Africa and east to the Hyrcanian forests in Iran and Azerbaijan. Here in southern Europe, A. monspessulanum is most often confused with the field or hedge maple, A. campestre. The field maple, however, has larger, distinctly five-lobed leaves and milky instead of clear sap.

There are three specimens of Montpellier maple at the Arboretum, so you don’t need to fly across the pond to find it. Accession 1491-83-B, located just a short way down Oak Path, was wild-collected in the Lautaret botanical garden near Grenoble, France, and is currently 24 feet (7.3 meters) tall. Two other specimens are nestled in the Maple Collection along Willow Path. One young accession (264-2004-B; just under 10 feet [3 meters] tall) originated from a cultivated plant at the Bordeaux Botanical Garden. The second (12507-A), a mature tree accessioned in 1910, is an astonishing 43 feet (13 meters) tall. Bonsai enthusiasts also appreciate A. monspessulanum because its small leaves reduce even further under bonsai culture—perhaps we’ll see it one day in the Arboretum’s Larz Anderson collection.

Although I’ll always love sugar maple, there’s something to be said for its sturdy Mediterranean cousin. I think I can make some room in my heart for two very-favorite maples.

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