

Uncommon By Any Name: *Acer pensylvanicum*

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One thing I found challenging when I first started working at the Arboretum was learning (and using) scientific names for plants instead of their common names. While perhaps easier to use than those tongue-twisting Latin binomials, common names prove problematic for identification because they can refer to generic groupings (think of honeysuckle or rose) and can vary in usage from place to place (in the United States, a *Tilia* is called a linden; in the United Kingdom, a lime). Nevertheless, common names can offer intriguing clues about plants and their formal, natural, and historical associations. Consider the diversity of references suggested by the many common names for *Acer pensylvanicum*—from striped maple to whistlewood—and you begin to appreciate how one plant can inspire many appellations.

Native to North America from Nova Scotia to Wisconsin and south through the Appalachians to northern Georgia, *A. pensylvanicum* is called striped maple or snakebark maple because its smooth, olive-green bark bears bright green and white vertical striations. It shares this trait with more than a dozen other maples in Section *Macrantha*, though all the rest (including *A. davidii*, *A. maximowiczii*, and *A. rufinerve*) originate from Asia, making the snakebark maples a great example of the eastern Asia/eastern North America disjunct pattern of biogeography. The considerable ornamental interest provided by its bark makes *A. pensylvanicum* a real stand out, particularly in the winter landscape.

In spring, the leaves of *A. pensylvanicum* unfold tinged with pink and mature to bright green. It bears large, serrately margined leaves that measure up to seven inches (18 centimeters) across. Long-stalked and typically with three sharp-tipped lobes, the leaf shape suggests a third common name for the tree, goose-foot maple. In autumn, leaves turn a clear yellow. A primarily dioecious plant with male and female flowers on different plants, the tree bears long, pendent racemes of delicate, pale yellow-green

flowers in early spring, which give way to graceful chains of pinkish samaras (winged seeds) that are extremely showy by summer's end.

Not overly abundant in the wild, striped maples grow to only 30 to 40 feet (9 to 12 meters) in height and spread, and are often multi-trunked because of wildlife browsing. In addition to feeding on the tree's soft shoots and young foliage, deer and moose also rub the velvet on their antlers against the smooth trunks of *A. pensylvanicum* as they approach the rutting season, suggesting two additional common names—moose maple and moosewood. When cultivated in the landscape with good soil, adequate moisture, and at least partial shade, moosewood can thrive as a striking specimen of intermediate size. While the species is not prone to any significant insect pest or disease problems, gardeners should protect its soft trunk from lawnmower injuries and other mishaps. The ease of its wood to yield to the knife once made it a popular choice for making whistles, and some still call it whistlewood.

The Arboretum has cultivated *A. pensylvanicum* since 1874. Today, you may observe 14 individuals of the species representing nine accessions, including two specimens of the cultivar 'Erythrocladum', selected for the coral pink to red color of its young winter twigs. Holdings of the species include individuals wild-collected by Senior Research Scientist Emeritus Peter Del Tredici in 1979 (in West Cornwall, Connecticut), Keeper of the Living Collections Michael Dosmann in 2008 (in Franklin County, New York and Mt. Wachusett, Massachusetts), and Manager of Plant Records Kyle Port in 2013 (in Orland, Maine). Most grow on the east side of Meadow Road in the Azalea Border and along the edge of the Maple Collection, and on the west side of Meadow Road in the North Woods. Visit any time of year to appreciate this truly remarkable native, no matter what name you call it.

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