

OPINION

Scarsdale Inquirer
10-2-87

Some trees you should know

By JANE BEDICHEK

The oldest residents in Scarsdale are our magnificent trees. Some acquaintance with their individual characters and histories helps us to enjoy these stately neighbors.

The tallest hereabout is the tuliptree. Its scientific name, *Liriodendron*, means "Lilytree." Its yellow flowers are tulip or lily-like, but are borne so high up on the tree, we see them only when they fall to the ground. The leaves in autumn turn golden. They have an odd shape: instead of ending in a point, they have a V-shaped notch cut out of the tip.

When you stand on the Scarsdale Post Office steps and look across the street to Chase Park, the most sky-reaching tree there is a tulip. Notice the straight trunk with no side branches until high up. John Kieran compares the trunk to a Greek column. Another tulip can be seen from the post office by looking north. It stands on Woodland Place between the sidewalk on the street, next to the driver-access mail box.

Few nurseries carry tuliptrees. They are hard to transplant. The ones in our midst were planted by nature. The early European settlers were impressed by this American tree and sent seeds home. As early as 1687 a tuliptree was growing in a garden in Leyden.

Indians and pioneers made fine canoes out of the straight-growing tulip. It was possible to hollow out a single log to extreme thinness, for the wood is easy to work and at the same time one of the lightest in the forest. In Tennessee the tree is called "Canoe wood." Daniel Boone made a tulipwood canoe 60 feet long to carry his family and gear down the Ohio River.

The tulip had a distinguished career in Europe. Russell Page, the English landscape gardener who designed fine gardens in Europe and the United States, including the PepsiCo headquarters in Purchase, writes in his book "Education of a Gardener," "Of all the large deciduous trees I know, none is nobler than the tuliptree, *Liriodendron tulipifera*." He met it first in his native England at a Lincolnshire nursery and then found a magnificent specimen on the royal grounds at Windsor Castle.

"The finest examples I know of in England," he continues, "are in the woods landscaped in the 18th century at Stourhead in Wiltshire" (a stately home much visited by garden enthusiasts today). He tells his English readers that the tuliptree is native to the eastern United States and was

planted by Thomas Jefferson on the campus as part of his design for the University of Virginia at Charlottesville.

One more Russell Page note: for Prince Aly Khan's house on Lake Geneva, which had not a tree or a bush on the site, "In a small, bare garden such as this I could easily have fallen into the temptation of planting a few fast-growing trees: but since it was so small I felt it must be precious, so I chose the tuliptree, slow-growing, but early showing its distinction." Around it he put liquidambar and dogwood, also American in origin.

If the tulip is our tallest tree, the one with the thickest trunk is the sycamore and its bred-in-Europe offspring, the London planetree. The scientific name for both is "Platanus."

The American sycamore was taken to England and there, before 1800, crossed with the Oriental plane. The product of this union is the London plane, which takes up less room than its American parent and stands smoke, dust and

Jane Bedichek, a Scarsdale resident, received the Outstanding Forest Landowner Award in 1984 from the Forest Practice Board of Region 3 (which covers six counties in New York State) for forest practices carried out on land she owns and manages in Putnam County.

wind. Because of these good qualities, it is the most widely planted street tree in London and Paris.

Both the sycamore and the London plane have flakey bark that, as the tree grows, separates from the bole and breaks off in thin, jigsaw-like pieces. Both have fruits that are brown balls about an inch in diameter which hang conspicuously on long stems, giving the nickname "Buttonball" to the tree. The sycamore balls hang singly, the London plane produces two to five in a group.

You can see stalwart specimens circling the Scarsdale train station, in front of the post office, and leaning out to catch the sun over Walworth Avenue.

Pioneers sometimes used cross-section slices of large sycamores to make primitive solid wheels for ox carts. If the trees were hollow, as many old ones were, they might saw them into three or four-foot lengths, nail a bottom in each, and have strong barrels for storing grain.

For us today, the sycamore is a stout holder of swings and a good climbing tree with its smooth bark. We will recognize it by its ample girth and the dappled color pattern of the bark: rich brown and grays with clay yellow and white patches. High up in the tree, the white patches make the branches look whitewashed.

A third tree worth getting to know is the beech. Not quite so tall as the tulip nor so massive in the bole as the sycamore, it approached both in its dimensions.

The beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) is the most widely distributed tree in New York State. Groves of them are found along the Bronx River and wherever nature has been left to her own devices. One often sees a mother tree with young beeches around her. The bark is smooth, close, and steel-gray in color.

The gray trunk of mature beeches spreads at ground level and looks rather like a big elephant's leg. The leaves have sharp teeth along the edge. The winter buds too are sharp and slender. The twin nuts, triangular and shiny brown, are carried in thick-walled prickly husks. They are falling to the ground now and are enjoyed by squirrels, raccoons, pheasants, and many other creatures.

If you see a tree with initials carved on it, you are probably looking at a beech, for its bark is easily written on, a fact known back at the dawn of history. The European beech, a close relative of our tree, was named by the Latin poet Virgil, who asked, "Or shall I rather the sad verse repeat which on the Beech's bark I lately writ?"

The ancient Saxons wrote runes on pieces of beech-board. In fact, from the Saxon word for beech tree, "Bece," evolved their word "Boc" for letter and our word "book!"

In our own American idiom a frontiersman wrote on a beech in Tennessee lines that could still be read in 1880:

"D. Boone
Cilled a Bar
On Tree
In Year 1760"

When that tree fell in 1916, it was 28 feet around. The forest service estimated it had started life in 1551.

Next time you see the smooth gray beech bark, you might think of Daniel Boone, Virgil and rune books. To identify the sycamore, look for white and gray jigsaw pieces on a stout trunk. The tulip can be remembered as a Greek column of towering height. They are neighbors worth knowing.