Platanus x acerifolia
London planetree

The London planetree (*Platanus x acerifolia)* is a cross between the North American sycamore (*Platanus occidentalis*) and the Oriental planetree (*Platanus orientalis*). Many important ornamental trees have been developed by crossing American species with European or Asian ones. The London planetree originated in England in the seventeenth century, when the first specimen was discovered growing in a London botanic garden. It proved to be hardier and more vigorous than either of its parent species. Today, the London planetree is one of the most common street trees in cities around the world, treasured not only for the beauty of its camouflage-like, exfoliating bark and impressive crown spread, but also for its resilience, drought tolerance, and dependability. Although a beautiful tree, it should be planted only in open areas where it has plenty of room to reach its mature size, growing 70 to 100 feet tall with a canopy up to 120 feet wide.

The fuzzy, ball-like fruit of the planetree is a cluster of tightly packed seed capsules. There are often clusters of two to three fruiting balls per stem that ripen in fall and slowly release tiny, wind-borne seeds throughout winter. The seeds are a good source of food for birds during the colder months when food is scarce.

The large leaves of *Platanus x acerifolia* resemble those of a maple (*Acer)*, which is why it is called *acerifolia*. While you won't find any leaves on these trees this month, winter is a perfect time to observe the exfoliating bark of the London planetree. As patches of bark peel away, a mosaic of colors —green, olive, yellow, cream, lavender, gray, tan, and brown are revealed. This camouflage-like pattern makes the tree easy to recognize, although a few other species have similar bark, including lacebark elm, river birch, and stewartia.

London planetrees shed their bark as a natural defense mechanism, expelling accumulated pollutants such as soot and grime. This exfoliation reveals lighter, attractive inner bark and helps keep the tree's pores clear, allowing it to "breathe." The process is a key reason London planetrees are exceptionally resilient and thrive in polluted urban environments.

The Arboretum has 9 London planetrees. You can visit them here. ✳