

# Acers in the park

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For many readers the name *Acer* may bring to mind one of the numerous Japanese Maple horticultural varieties, in the form of a small tree with sycamore-like leaves, usually red. However, the name '*Acer*' is the Botanical Latin for a large and widespread genus of trees (the 'Maples'). It means 'pointed' referring to the tips of the leaf lobes found in many *Acer* species (Figs. 1 and 2). But the 330 or so *Acers* in the Park, including 12 different species, have leaves that range from being hardly lobed at all (e.g. the Snake Bark Maple) to some that have pinnate leaves i.e. made up of several leaflets (e.g. the Box Elder). The common feature of the whole genus is the typical paired winged seed, known as a 'samaras' to botanists, and as a 'helicopter' to the rest of us (Figs. 1 and 2). These seeds split into singles after being shed.

The Sycamore (*A. pseudoplatanus*, with over 150 in the Park) will be familiar to all with its palmate five-lobed leaves that have serrated or

toothed edges and long 'tails' or panicles of drooping yellow flowers (Fig. 1). It was introduced to the British Isles in about the 16th century or possibly earlier. If you have read our article about Plane trees (Latin name *Platanus*), you may recall that *their* very similar leaves are distinguished by being attached *alternately* on their shoots while, in the Maples, they are opposite each other. Attractive varieties to look out for when the leaves emerge in mid-April include 'Brilliantissimum', with orange/salmon-pink leaves on the grass south-east of the lake, the less conspicuous 'Prinz Handjery', on the corner of the path west of the Zoo entrance, and the yellow-leaved variety on the corner of the path leading north to the Old English Garden. Sycamores seed freely, and you can see little seedlings in many places.

The other Maple that is named for its resemblance to the Plane is *Acer platanoides*, the Norway Maple. There is a row of five on the southern border of the grass football pitches

and elsewhere in the Park there are specimens of decorative varieties, such as 'Crimson King' with yellow flowers contrasting with purple leaves in mid-April (in the border east of the Pear Tree Café). The leaves are more obviously 5-lobed than a Sycamore (in which the two lobes nearest the leafstalk are quite small) and the pointed tips look sharper. The flowerheads form upright clusters.

Similar to the Sycamore and Norway Maple is the Cappadocian Maple from South Eastern Europe (*A. cappadocicum*). This has no serrations of the leaf margins but prominent 'Acer' points to the leaf lobes. The flowerheads are upright clusters. Our trees, on the grass south of the Tea Terrace kiosk, are a variety which has attractive yellow leaves in October.

England's only *native* maple is the Field Maple (*Acer campestre*). Its 5-lobed leaves are no more than 10cm wide compared to 15-25cm for Sycamore. The leaf edges are not serrated. The flower heads are upright but smaller than the Norway Maple.

## Left to right:

**Fig 1.** *A. pseudoplatanus* or Sycamore flower heads. Inset, paired samaras.

**Fig 2.** *A. platanoides* or Norway Maple 'Crimson King'. Upright flowers, very pointed leaves. Inset samaras - the pair join at a wider angle than Sycamore seeds.

**Fig 3.** Flower heads: 1. Box Elder (male), 2. Red Acer (female), 3. Silver Maple (female). Despite the differing flowers, all produce similar paired samaras.

**Fig 4.** *Acer x "freemanii"*. This cultivar is a hybrid between Red and Silver maples.

**Fig 5.** The bark of Paperbark and Snakebark *Acers* compared (*A. Griseum* and *A. davidii*)



Fig 1.



Fig 2.

The paired seeds are almost in a straight line.

The leaf on the Canadian Flag is from the Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*), which provides the sap which is the commonest source of maple syrup. It is rarely grown in Britain and we don't have one in the Park, but we do have other Canadian Maples, Silver Maple (*A. saccharinum*) and Red Maple (*A. rubrum*) (Fig. 3). These have green leaves with silvery undersurface. They can both colour orange or red in autumn, but *A. rubrum* is the more reliable and there are some very red ones in the Maple Avenue that leads to the cricket pavilion. Maple Avenue was planted in 2008 with a donation from Canadian benefactors. Both species produce their flowers before the leaves. In *A. rubrum* the flowers form drooping clusters, but they are not in 'tails' like a Sycamore. *A. saccharinum* on the other hand produces interesting flowers that sit directly on the wood. When the paired seeds form they are hardly angled apart at all. We also have

examples of a hybrid of these species, Freeman's Maple (*Acer x freemanii*) - the striking red foliage of the tree north of the cricket nets is at its best at the beginning of November (when the sight is unfortunately spoiled by the fencing erected for the fireworks display) (Fig.4).

Lastly, three *Acers* without maple-shaped leaves. *A. griseum*, Paperbark Maple, is from China and has leaves of three leaflets (each one with small lobes). The name "*griseum*" refers to the blue-grey undersurface. These go very red/orange in autumn, but the most distinctive year-round feature is the peeling 'paperbark'. They are not easy to propagate and we are lucky to have them in the Park; four trees can be seen in the Winter Garden behind the bench at the east end (Fig. 5).

*Acer davidii* (on the corner of the path leading east from the Subtropical Garden) is one of the Snake-bark Maples (Fig. 5). It is also from China and named after the missionary and naturalist, Père David. It has a

characteristic bark which looks like snakeskin. Its leaves are not lobed but rounded with teeth, similar to Lime trees. Its flowers are in drooping tails like a Sycamore.

*Acer negundo*, Box Elder, is a rather small tree. Neither its ash-like pinnate leaves nor its tassel flowers look like *Acer* (nor Box though they are rather like Elder). However the seeds are the typical winged pair. It was introduced to Europe by the later 17th century from North America. It can be a fast spreading pest in Central Europe but seems well-behaved in the UK.

At [www.treesofbatterseapark.org](http://www.treesofbatterseapark.org) you can access an interactive map which shows the location of some of the trees mentioned here, and also shows trees and shrubs of interest in particular months of the year. There are more photos of *Acers* at <https://www.treesofbatterseapark.org/treemap.htm?genus=Acer>.

To discuss *Acers*, or other trees and shrubs in Battersea Park, contact [batterseaparktreewatchers@btinternet.com](mailto:batterseaparktreewatchers@btinternet.com)

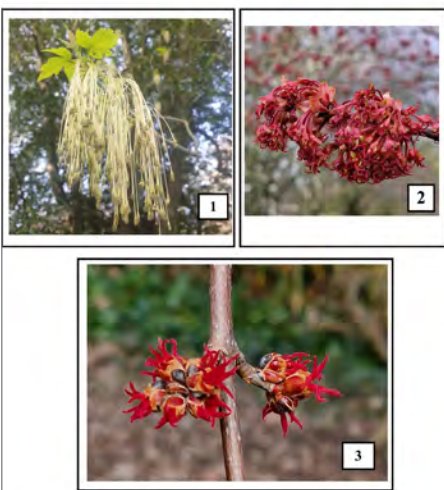


Fig 3.



Fig 4.



Fig 5.