

November 2014 Plant of the Month

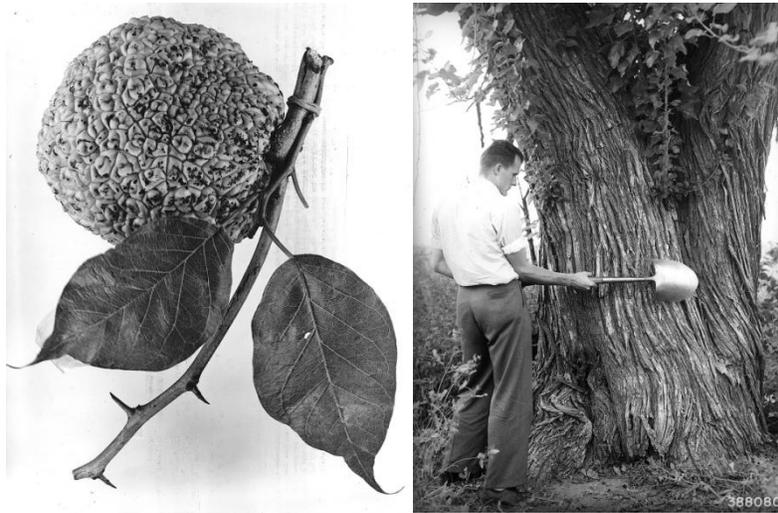


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Maclura pomifera Nutt. Osage Orange, Hedge Apple
By Karl Anderson

Osage oranges, if you prefer. You see the round fruits lying on the ground in the autumn, conspicuous among the fallen leaves. They look like lumpy oranges or small grapefruit. Cut into one, and you find small seeds embedded in tough radiating fibers that ooze a sticky white sap. The Osage orange tree is in the same plant family as mulberry, but you can't eat the fruits. In fact, few extant animals do eat them, but the giant ground sloths and other extinct big mammals of the last Ice Age probably did so. Today, squirrels will sometimes tear them apart to get at the seeds, but it is a messy process. It is easier to raid the bird feeder.

Osage orange is native only to a relatively small area of Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas, the one-time homeland of the Osage Indians. But it was widely planted outside the native range as a hedge during the 19th century, prior to the advent of barbed wire. When pruned to promote coppice growth, the stiff, thorny stems made an effective barrier to roaming livestock. It was one of the trees that were planted during the Depression-era Great Plains "shelterbelt" program. Today, mature specimens in New Jersey often mark the lines of old fields and property borders.

These are not big trees – one rarely sees one locally that is more than thirty feet tall. The bark is dark brown, deeply ridged and furrowed. The trees often have a somewhat distorted, gnarled look to them. The species has separate male and female trees, so you can't always rely on the fruit as an identification mark. But the alternate branching, elliptical long-pointed leaves, and thorny branches give it away.

Osage orange has one of the hardest and heaviest North American woods, rivaled only by the live oak of the South. It is hard to work but it makes great tool handles, wooden bowls, and ornamental carvings. The Native Americans used it for war clubs. They also valued it for bows. Straight-grained Osage orange timber makes a very good bow; but straight-grained wood on this tree is hard to find. The wood is bright yellow (another identifying mark) and chips of it can be steeped in water to make a permanent dye, ranging from buff to bright yellow in color

The original range of the species was colonized by the French, and they gave it the name bois d' arc – or “bow wood” from that use of the wood by Native Americans. This word is still current in some parts of the United States, but with the edges kind of rounded off, into “bodock” or “bodark”. The scientific name is *Maclura pomifera* – “Maclura” for Willam Maclure, President of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia from 1817 to 1839, and “pomifera” meaning “fruit-bearing”.