

## Yard and Garden – 11-12-2016- Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

Sound judgement gained from life's experiences is my definition of common sense. Learning from one's mistakes is a great method for acquiring good judgement. For example, if one was to wander accidentally, for the first time, into a bed of poison ivy and break out with a rash, one should quickly recognize the dangerous plant and avoid it in the future. With this being true, one might assume that as a person ages, he or she should become wiser and possess more common sense. Assuming such thinking is correct, at my age I should have an inordinate amount of common sense. Notice, I said SHOULD HAVE!

This past week, I allowed all common sense to escape me. As a result, I paid for it dearly. I knew better, but instead I fell into the same trap that I've experienced for many years in a row.

When Rita and I bought our home twenty-six years ago, two of the first things we noticed about our home's landscape were the large American sycamore trees growing in the front yard. At that time, everything about those trees was awe inspiring to me. They are still growing in our front yard. After twenty-six more years, they are much larger and continue to amaze me. I know that I've referenced these two trees in my past columns, but they once again challenged my common sense. The fact is I have a love/hate relationship with these two trees.

First, allow me to explain my love relationship. When we purchased our home, I was instantly captivated by their stately look. I knew very little about sycamore trees. I certainly lacked any experience working with sycamores. Since then, I've learned much. Their scientific name is *Plantanus occidentalis*. The American sycamore is indigenous to the eastern part of the United States. It is among the largest of deciduous trees, reaching heights of 100 to 150 feet and is known to attain the greatest diameter of any hardwood tree. The bark on the trunk and larger branches exfoliates in patches. When the bark pops free, an attractive patchwork of browns, yellows and greens against a background of white remains. The oldest bark falls away in thin brittle sheets, exposing younger and lighter colored bark. The American sycamore is an excellent shade tree. Its leaves are beautiful. Dark green in color and very large in size sycamore leaves somewhat resemble maple leaves with numerous pointed lobes. However, they are much larger and can measure ten inches to twelve inches in length and width. Later in the summer, the American sycamore produces numerous, unique-looking, ball-shaped seedpods about one inch in diameter.

Now, for my hate relationship. During a wet, prolonged spring, sycamore trees can acquire a fungal disease called anthracnose. The disease causes the tree to abort newly developing leaves and twigs, creating a constant mess of litter on the lawn. When the weather finally becomes stable and warmer, anthracnose subsides, and the littering stops, but only for a short while. By mid-summer, that beautiful, exfoliating bark I wrote about, begins to accumulate in brittle sheets over the lawn creating a new type of litter that continues for the balance of the season. As autumn approaches, those beautiful large green leaves also create a mess of their own. Rather than turning brown and falling at once, they do so sporadically. I am constantly

raking leaves from September to January. By early spring, the unique seed balls begin to accumulate in the lawn. Sycamores are messy.

While recently raking sycamore leaves, I once again neglected to use my common sense. I've known for a long time that I'm highly allergic to sycamore leaves. The underside of a sycamore leaf has tiny hairs called tomentose. The hairs become a fine, irritating dust after the leaves have fallen in autumn. After raking for only a short while, my nose began running profusely. I continually sneezed and coughed. Although I showered and changed clothes immediately after working with the leaves, I continually coughed and sneezed into the evening and through the early morning hours. Another sleepless night— all from not using common sense.



If common sense is gained from life's experiences, I should know better. Next time I should wear a dust mask while raking sycamore leaves. Notice, I said **SHOULD WEAR!**