What is a “sycamore?” . . . & other uncommon common names

In a previous article (“The Curious Case of the Disappearing Asters, NCBG Newsletter, March–April 2004), I discussed the scientific names of plants and how they can change, sometimes to our consternation and frustration. The common names of plants are fascinating as well—and at times confusing or misleading.

So, what is a sycamore? This seems like an easy question to anyone even vaguely aware of plants and trees in eastern North America: a species of large tree (Platanus occidentalis) found primarily along the banks of rivers and streams, with attractive white and tan bark. If we look beyond North America, though, the situation becomes confusing. To the British, a sycamore is a species of maple (Acer pseudoplatanus) native to Europe but common as a naturalized tree in Britain, and Platanus is the “plane-tree” or “plane.” In the Middle East, a sycamore is a fig: Ficus sycomorus! How can the name “sycamore” apply to so many different, even unrelated trees?

The winding path of the sycamore begins near the headwaters of the Nile, in central Africa, where a tall kind of fig tree with edible fruits, named Ficus sycomorus by Linnaeus in 1753, grew naturally. Probably because of its fruit, F. sycomorus was brought to the Middle East at least 5000 years ago, where it was called “shikma” in Aramaic and Hebrew. It became one of the larger and more conspicuous trees in the region and is mentioned eight times in the Bible. When the Romans came in contact with this tree, they latinized “shikma” into “sycomorus.”

The continental European tree Acer pseudoplatanus was introduced into the British Isles in the sixteenth century and became well-established by 1600. Early British botanists, many of whom were also clergymen, applied the name “sycamore” to this maple, believing this new tree from Europe to be the sycamore of the Bible, and also presumably wishing to make familiar the strange plants mentioned in the scriptures. (Similarly, the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden, translated as “apple” in English bibles, is regarded by most scholars to have actually been the pomegranate.)

When English settlers reached the New World, they saw trees that superficially resembled the sycamores at home—large trees with large, palmately lobed leaves. The settlers called them sycamores, and the name stuck. Why didn’t they call them plane trees, since the “London plane” is a well-known tree? It turns out that the plane tree (Platanus) was unknown in England at the time of North American colonization, and the London plane, a hybrid, only appeared in the early 1700s.

So, with “sycamore” we have one name and three different trees—fig, maple, and plane. Yet often with common names, the converse is true: one plant and many names! An excellent example is Diphasiastrum digitatum (often still known as Lyco-podium flabelligerhine), the most familiar and common clubmoss of North Carolina. It has been known as running-cedar, ground-pine, ground cedar, running clubmoss, hag’s-bed, southern running pine, fan clubmoss, crowfoot club-moss, southern ground-cedar, trailing ground-pine, wreath moss, and probably others!

All this has led some to suggest standardization of common names: that each plant should have a single, official common name. But doesn’t that bring us back to the purpose of scientific names? Moreover, it leads to the creation of common names for plants that don’t have them—often by a rather forced translation of the Latin. Thus we have the fascinating endemic of granite flatrocks of Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina, the “little amphi-anthus,” Amphianthus pusillus; not to mention the “spreading yellow false foxglove,” Aureolaria patula (with all of those adjectives, one wonders just what is spreading?)

An institutionalized worse-case scenario is the Carolina endemic federal endangered plant roughleaf loosestrife, Lysimachia asperulifolia. Alas, the leaves are smoother than a baby’s bottom. The common name was created by mistranslation of the specific epithet, someone thinking that “asperulifolia” meant “with rough leaves,” whereas it actually means “with leaves resembling Asperula” (the European sweet woodruff). I suppose it really should be called “woodruff-leaved loosestrife!”

Another complication of common names is that they are dependent on the user’s context. In eastern North America, we have only one “sycamore,” so it can be called sycamore. But in North American tree books, it is often called eastern sycamore to distinguish it from several southwestern species. Ironically, the Latin Platanus occidentalis means “western,” because Linnaeus was distinguishing the tree of the western hemisphere from the Asian Platanus orientalis!

Let’s use and appreciate common names for what they are: culturally interesting, messy, and a good (though not always reliable) way to communicate with other people interested in the natural world.