

LATIN AND LORE IN THE PARK – Botanical tree names and meanings and the stories behind them

Acer saccharum – Sugar maple – (Maple Family) – *acer* means sharp and refers to the points of the maple leaf and that the wood of some maples was used as lances; *saccharum* means sugar referring to the sap of the tree .

Acer ginnala maxim – Amur maple – (Soapberry Family) – The genus name, *Acer*, is the classical name for maples. The species name, *ginnala*, comes from a local name for this tree in its native east Asian range. Amur is a region of Siberia. Introduced to North America around 1860 it is now widely planted as an ornamental tree sporting pink winged seeds and bright red leaves in the fall.

Acer saccharinum – Silver maple – (Maple Family) – the origin of the word *saccharinum* is unclear. It could be a misspelling of *saccharum* or as some believe, it may also mean sweet. Although the sap is only half as sweet as the sugar maple it yields a delicious pale syrup.

Acer negundo – Box Elder or Manitoba maple – (Maple Family) – *negundo* is derived from the Sanskrit and Bengali word *nurgundi* which describes the chaste tree which has compound leaves and is native to India. Named the Manitoba Maple because it is native to the Canadian prairies this tree like all maples can be tapped for its sap. It is however the least productive of the maples yet when the Prairies were first settled and sugar was scarce even this tree was tapped.

Aesculus glabra willd – Ohio buckeye – (Soapberry Family) – The Latin name *Aesculus* refers to an oak with edible acorns, from the Latin *esca*, meaning food, despite the fact that *Aesculus* species are not related to oaks and their fruit is not edible. The species name *glabra* comes from the Latin for bald or smooth. The tree is called buckeye because of the resemblance of its seeds to deer eyes. Native Americans blanched the nuts to extract tannic acid used to make leather.

Scabiosa Atropurpurea – Pincushion Flower – (Honeysuckle Family) – Genus name *Scabosia* comes from the Latin word meaning itch (*scabius*) in reference to a prior use of plant leaves to treat certain skin disorders. Specific epithet comes from the

Latin words meaning dark (*atro*) and purple (*purpureum*) in reference to flower color. The flowers are attractive to hummingbirds and butterflies.

Betula papyrifera – White birch or paper birch – (Birch Family) – *Betula* is Latin name for birch and means shine referring to the tree's white bark. *Papyrifera* is from the Greek *papyrus* (paper) and Latin *ferre* (to bear) referring to the bark which is thin like paper and is easily peeled off the tree. Bark should never be peeled off birch trees as this leaves unsightly black rings and in some cases can kill the tree. The Indians used birchbark for wigwams, baskets, mattresses and message paper.

Fraxinus pennsylvanica (*var.subintegerrima*) – Green ash – (Olive Family) – *Fraxinus* comes from the Greek word *pharxis* (hedge) referring to its frequent use as a hedge. *Pennsylvanica* refers to the area that it was harvested in colonial times. Green ash is a variety of the red ash. Ashes from the burnt wood are high in potash and the Indians and settlers used it as fertilizer.

Malus spp. – Flowering crabapple – (Rose Family) – *Malus* is the Latin name for apple from the Greek “melon”. Flowering crabapple trees include a wide range of cultivars. Flowers explode in the spring before the foliage in a variety of colors including red, pink and white. The fruit of flowering crabapples is not edible as are the fruits of other crabapple trees but they are valuable food for wildlife during the winter.

Juglans nigra – Black walnut (Walnut Family) – *Juglans* is the contraction of the Latin words, *Jovis* and *glans* meaning Jupiter's acorn. The Romans dedicated this tree to Jupiter, the most powerful of the gods. The specific name, *nigra*, refers to the dark bark of the tree. Black walnut is an important tree commercially, as the wood is a deep brown color and easily worked. The fruits, walnuts, are cultivated for their distinctive and desirable taste. The husks of the fruit were once in great demand producing a black dye and tannins but were also made into coal that was used in the filters of gas masks during World War 1. Indians ground the husks into a poison used to kill fish.

Juglans cinerea – Butternut – (Walnut Family) – *Cinerea* comes from the Latin *cineris* meaning dust or ash and refers to the light grey color of the bark. During the American Revolution, a butternut extract made from the inner bark of the tree was used in an attempt to prevent smallpox, and to treat dysentery and other stomach and intestinal discomfort.

Juniperus virginiana – Red Juniper or eastern red cedar – (Cypress Family) – The Latin name *Juniperus* comes from "junio" (young) and "parere" (to produce) referring to "evergreen". *Virginiana* means of Virginia where the tree was first observed in 1564. The name is red cedar is a misnomer as it doesn't belong to the genus *Cedrus* which is the true cedar native to Africa and Asia. The fragrant wood is used in linen chests (cedar chests) and liners of cupboards and wardrobes.

Larix laricina – Tamarack (Pine Family) – The generic name *Larix* (fat) is the common Latin word for larch and refers to the resin of this tree. *Laricina* means resembling *Larix* as this species was once considered to be a pine. Tamaracks lose their needles in the fall.

Pinus cembra – Swiss stone pine – (Pine Family) – *Pinus* is Latin for Pine. *Cembra* is from the Italian vernacular name for this plant. *Cembra* is a community in Trentino in the northern Italian region. The tree is native to Central Europe, ranging from the Alps to the Carpathian Mountains. Swiss stone pine and Italian stone pine (*Pinus pinea*) are the main sources for the pine nuts consumed in Europe. Swiss stone pine takes 14-16 years to begin to bear cones, and it takes cones three years to mature, so patience is required if you want to harvest pine nuts.

Picea pungens – Colorado spruce – (Pine Family) – The generic name, *Picea*, comes from the Latin *pix* which means pitch or resin. The specific name, *pungens*, means sharp pointed and refers to the long, prickly needles that the tree bears. This tree is of little use commercially for lumber as it is very knotty but because of its bluish green needles it has found its place as a prominent landscape tree.

Picea glauca – White spruce – (Pine Family) – The species name *glauca* from the Latin *glaucus* pertains to the glaucous or bluish-grey or green color of the needles.

The Indians used the long roots of spruce and pine to make a rope called *watap* used to stitch birch bark when making canoes.

Pinus banksiana – Jack pine – (Pine Family) – The specific name *Banksiana* is the Latinized name of an English naturalist, Banks, who was a companion of famous British navigator James Cook. Settlers believed that jack pine poisoned the land and attempted to get rid of it by burning the stands. This was futile, as fire promotes rejuvenation of jack pine forests.

Pinus sylvestris – Scots pine – (Pine Family) – The specific name, *sylvestris* derives from the Latin *silva* (forest). The Scots pine was introduced to America in the early days of settlement. Because of its rapid growth as a young tree, its resistance to pollution and adaptation to various soil types it is an ideal species for Christmas trees and landscape plantings as well as shelterbelts.

Pinus strobus – Eastern white pine – (Pine Family) – *Strobus* derived from the Greek *strobilor* (top), or *strobos* (rolled around) refers to the tree's cone. Eastern white pine played a major role in Canadian history. They were used to build the first large rafts that navigated the St. Lawrence River and other rivers for more than a century.

Picea mariana – Black spruce – (Pine Family) – The generic name, *Picea*, comes from the Latin *pice* which means pitch or resin. An English botanist, Philip Miller, named it *Picea mariana*, Maryland spruce in 1731. However, black spruce doesn't grow in Maryland. Black spruce beer made by boiling new shoots with molasses, maple syrup or honey and adding yeast was a good source of vitamins and minerals. Ya, let's go with that!

Prunus virginiana – Choke cherry – (Rose Family) – *Prunus* is Latin for plum or cherry while the specific name, *virginiana* comes from the name Virginia. The common name choke cherry refers to the astringent fruit which coats the mouth when eaten. Choke cherry leaves, bark and roots were used by Indians and settlers to make a tea used to treat coughs, stomach aches, tuberculosis and intestinal worms.

Prunus Americana – Wild plum – (Rose Family) – The specific name of this tree, *Americana*, refers to American. The bark, leaves and stones of the fruit should not be consumed as they create prussic acid (hydrogen cyanide) in the stomach.

Prunus triloba – Flowering almond – (Rose Family) – the specific name *triloba* means having three lobes and refers to the coarse, double-toothed, broad-ovate, medium green leaves that are often three lobed.

Pyrus ussuriensis “ure” – Ure pear – (Rose Family) – *ussuriensis* refers to the Ussuri River area of far eastern Russia. Ure is an interspecific cross between *pyrus ussuriensis* and *pyrus communis* (our usual pear), it was discovered at the Morden research station in Manitoba in 1978. The Ure pear is one of the oldest cold hardy pears.

Quercus macrocarpa Michx – Bur oak – (Beech Family) – The generic name *Quercus* is Latin for oak but is derived from Celtic and means “tree above all others”. *Macrocarpa* from the Greek *macro* (large) and *karpos* (fruit) refers to the tree’s acorns which are the largest of our indigenous oaks. The bark produces tannins that were used in tanning leather. The acorns are food for many animals such as chipmunks, squirrels, deer and bears.

Syringa reticulata – Japanese lilac – (Olive Family) – *Syringa* is from the Greek *syrinx*, which means “pipe” and refers to the hollow stems; *reticulata* means “netted” or “net-veined” and refers to the leaf venation. The Japanese tree lilac was introduced into cultivation in 1876.

Sorbus decora – Mountain ash – (Rose Family) – *Sorbus* means to absorb or stop perhaps pertaining to the tree’s preferred natural habitat of moist soils along the edges of marshes and lakes. The specific name, *decora* (elegant, or ornamental) refers to the showy flowers and bright red fruit.

Tilia Americana – American Basswood – (Linden Family) – The generic name *Tilia* is the Latin name likely derived from the Greek *ptilon* (wing) referring to the large floral bract. *Americana* refers to America. The wood from basswood trees is one of the lightest and softest but is strong nonetheless. It is an excellent wood for turning and carving. Native Americans carved ritual masks into the sapwood of a

tree and then tore them off to dry the other side. If the tree lived, the mask was considered to have supernatural powers.

Thuja occidentalis – Eastern arborvitae or eastern white cedar – (Cypress Family) – The generic name *Thuja* comes from the Greek *thuon* or *thuia* meaning odorous tree. *Occidentalis* means of the Occident or countries of the west such as European and America in contrast to the Orient where most known varieties were native. This was one of the first species of arborvitae discovered in North America. This renowned conifer saved Jacques Cartier's crew from certain death during the winter of 1535. The Iroquois along the St. Lawrence River prepared a tea called *annedda* by boiling the bark and foliage of the tree. Annedda, high in Vitamin C cured the sailors of scurvy.

Ulmus Americana L. – American elm – (Elm Family) – The generic Latin name *ulmus* means elm and is cognate with the Old High German word *elm*, or Old Norse word *almr*. The specific name *Americana* pertains to America. Dutch Elm Disease which first appeared in the Netherlands and northern France in 1917 and eventually showed up in Quebec by way of wooden crates in 1944 killed almost three quarters of a million trees in just 15 years. The disease has now spread from Atlantic Canada to Saskatchewan.

Ulmus pumila – Siberian elm – (Elm Family) – *Pumila* means small in Latin. The Siberian elm also known as Dwarf elm is a tree native to Central Asia, eastern Siberia, the Russian Far East, Mongolia, Tibet, northern China, India and Korea. Siberian elm was introduced in the 1860s for windbreaks, shade, lumber, and erosion control, and is still intentionally planted. It is very invasive and can be a nuisance and if not controlled can be found in gardens, pavement cracks, roadsides, waste areas, waterways, pastures, and natural plant communities.

Spiraea Vanhouttei – Bridal bouquet spirea – (Rose Family) – *Spiraea* is from Latin *spīraea*, meadowsweet, from Greek *speiraia*, privet, from *speira*, coil. The specific name *Vanhoutte* refers to Belgian nurseryman Louis Van Houtte. *Spiraea vanhouttei* is a cross between *S. trilobata* and *S. cantoniensis*. Billiard, a French nurseryman introduced his hybrid in 1862. However, it was Louis Van Houtte, that promoted the plant and then had it named in his honor.