

# London Planetree

*Platanus x acerifolia*

Some of my favorite places to enjoy a quiet stroll in Lawrenceville are the neighboring St. Mary's and Allegheny Cemeteries. In addition to being sacred burial grounds, these urban sanctuaries are home and refuge to a diverse community of plants and wildlife that can be enjoyed year round.



A London planetree in St. Mary's Cemetery, Steve Russ' selection for December's Tree of the Month. All photographs were taken by Steve, except where noted.<sup>1</sup>

I visit the peaceful grounds of St. Mary's cemetery to soak in some sun and the ever changing landscape. As I approach the entrance gates on Penn Avenue, I can't help but admire the continuous canopy of large, majestic London planetrees that outstretch their arms over the tall stone wall and sidewalk below.

I walk through the gates among the beautiful headstones of iron, granite and sandstone and can immediately distinguish which deciduous trees are London planetrees and which are not, even from a distance. Their most recognizable characteristic is the exfoliating bark which flakes off trunks and large branches in irregular masses, leaving behind a mottled yellowish-green, olive and brown surface. The fruits consist of furry tan globes that typically grow in groups of two and are enjoyed by finches and squirrels.

I continue down the red brick road toward St. Mary's Church and the gated entrance at the top of 46th Street. As the sun goes down, I peer through the distinctively irregular silhouettes of the London planetrees flanking the cemetery's western edge along 45th Street. I can't help but wonder, as I leave through the gates, would I be as likely to visit St. Mary's if these magnificent trees weren't here?

- Steve Russ

Often mistaken for the native American sycamore, one way to tell the difference is a sycamore's underlying bark is creamy white instead of yellowish-green. Planetrees prefer to grow in deep, rich, moist soils near bodies of water. However, they are extremely adaptable to a wide range of adverse growing conditions, such as compacted soils, drought and air pollution. Commonly used as a street tree, they are best situated in large areas, such as parks, golf courses, and yes, cemeteries. This is mainly because their extensive root system are not sidewalk-friendly and they drop a lot of plant debris throughout the year.

**Tree-of-the-Month** is published by *Lawrenceville Tree Tenders*, an all-volunteer organization with a mission to maintain existing street trees, educate residents, and re-forest the neighborhood. Technical review is provided by Matt Erb, with Friends of Pittsburgh Urban Forest. Editing and layout is provided by Christine Brill.



## Get Involved!

You can sign up for upcoming **Tree Tender Courses** at <[www.pittsburghforest.org](http://www.pittsburghforest.org)>.

E-mail <[lvttreetenders@gmail.com](mailto:lvttreetenders@gmail.com)> with comments or for more information about the group. Tree-of-the-Month nominations are also welcome.

<sup>1</sup> The leaf image above is from <<http://duncanmccampbell.com>>.

