

Not Fit to Print

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If you know someone who goes by a slew of different names, it could be that they want to hide a bad reputation, avoid arrest, or both. In the world of trees, that individual would be the boxelder, a native member of *Aceraceae*, the maple family. Boxelder is known by a dozen or more aliases, including Manitoba maple, ash-leaf maple, California maple, maple ash, sugar ash, and river maple. Because it is breakage-prone, grows fast, spreads easily, and can become a nuisance “weed” tree, its name is often preceded by a few choice words not suitable to print.

Boxelders are happiest on stream banks and flood plains, and a single-trunk specimen can grow as tall as eighty feet, with a diameter approaching three feet. The species has a shorter lifespan than its maple cousins, seldom living more than ninety years. Its weak wood and bad habit of growing as a multi-stem clump means it breaks easily and often. It apparently makes up for this character flaw by having the fastest growth rate of any maple.

Though much maligned, boxelder does have some interesting features. It is the only native maple with compound leaves, similar to those of ash. Also, it's the sole *dioecious* maple, meaning there are separate male and female trees, a fact which can be used to one's advantage, as you'll see later. This is another similarity to ash trees, which usually observe a division of the sexes. All other maples, as is the case in the majority of tree species, are *monoecious*, having both male and female flowers on every tree. An interesting sidebar is that ash trees are in fact *polygamo-dioecious*, with males able to convert to female trees if the male: female ratio is high.

Wood-turners who make bowls and other items on a lathe are quite fond of boxelders. Its wood, which is softer and generally lighter in colour as compared to other maples, often has streaks of red pigment throughout. This colouration, which is thought to be a chemical shield against decay, makes for striking and unique turned-wood creations. The irony is that boxelders are terrible at walling-off decay, something its *Acer* cousins do very well, though more modestly in dull hues.

Another bright side to boxelders is that their sap is laden with sugar, and they can be tapped just like sugar, red, and silver maples. One caveat (which I try to avoid because I don't like fish eggs) is that unlike the aforementioned maples, boxelders do not yield syrup with a typical maple flavor. Having tried it one spring, I'd say it's plenty sweet, but should be mixed with “real” maple syrup.

Historically, boxelder's range was roughly from the Rockies east almost to the Atlantic coast, and from the Gulf of Mexico north into southern Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. Scattered pockets were found in California, Nevada, and New Mexico.

Today its range has expanded considerably, thanks (or no thanks) to human activities. Like the rest of the maple clan, it bears copious winged “helicopter” seeds that readily blow around and take root in any disturbed soil. I read that during the housing boom after World War II, builders thought boxelders would make the fastest shade for their hasty developments. Though the trees probably were dubbed a more

prosaic name like river maples, loads of them were planted in post-war tracts, thus hastening their spread.

I hesitate to bring up a certain downside of Manitoba maples: boxelder bugs, which adore maples, preferably boxelders. The half-inch-long black bugs with a red crosshatched pattern drink sap from maple tissues, mainly the developing seeds. If you have not seen these oval, beetle-esque lovelies, you're fortunate. They seem to come out of nowhere in early fall to sun themselves on a south- or west-facing wall. Sometimes they end up inside, too. Luckily they're harmless and do not breed or otherwise do unwanted things indoors. They just wander around lost until you step on them and stain the carpet.

Dealing with boxelder bugs involves a lot of caulk and a good day's work to seal around windows, doors, and vents. It may be tedious, but I can attest that it works. A more dire approach is cut down any female boxelders you may have in the yard. Male trees are not as attractive to the bugs, most of which will fly off to nearby seed-bearing maples on someone else's property. I'd say it's best not to mention this strategy to your neighbours. In the meantime you can go back to calling boxelders by one of their more civilized names.

*An ISA-Certified Arborist since 1996, **Paul Hetzler** wanted to be a bear when he grew up, but failed the audition. Having gotten over much of his self-pity concerning that unfortunate event, he now writes essays about nature. His book "Shady Characters: Plant Vampires, Caterpillar Soup, Leprechaun Trees and Other Hilarities of the Natural World," is available on amazon.*