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SYCAMORE TREES IN BAKERSFIELD LANDSCAPES

Sycamores and plane trees are frequently found in landscapes and natural areas in the southern San Joaquin Valley. They are well adapted to the region, but pest problems may occur in both spring and fall.

The native California sycamore, *Platanus racemosa*, is found along streams and is considered to be a riparian plant. Its close relative, London plane tree, *Platanus acerifolia*, is used as a street tree in Europe and is found in urban landscapes throughout the US including California. Both species have larger-than-hand-sized leaves resembling those of maple trees, and both produce fruit in the form of spiny balls in late summer. The bark is cream-colored with patches of darker brown, and thin plates exfoliate to reveal new bark beneath. Sycamores and plane trees do well in irrigated landscapes, and may be seen to reach heights above 50 feet in several neighborhoods in Bakersfield. In mature landscapes, they can become dominant trees, with heights of 70 feet.

Despite their adaptation and native plant status of *P. racemosa*, sycamores and plane trees have certain drawbacks in urban landscapes. Following spring rains, these trees are often infected with anthracnose disease, sometimes simply called blight. ("Blight" refers to decline or death of above-ground plant parts, but is not a specific term for describing plant disease.) Anthracnose is caused by a fungus, which requires water for spore germination and disease development. In years with a dry spring, little disease will be seen, but in wet years, frequent rains promote extensive disease development. Infected leaves turn black or brown and curl. If the petiole is infected, a leaf will fall, even if the leaf blade looks normal. The fungus also infects twigs causing a formation of cankers of sunken tissue. If a tree has anthracnose several consecutive years, the disease changes the appearance of the crown, resulting in many dead twigs with living branches sparsely in-leaf.

Although sycamores and plane trees may appear to be defoliated by anthracnose, damage normally is confined to the first crop of leaves and trees will leaf out again. Protectant sprays of a fungicide could be applied to minimize disease development. However, because of the size of many of these trees, the variability of the weather, and the partial control available with currently registered materials, spraying is not usually recommended. Twigs or branches can be pruned if cankers are present. Although possibly distressing to see a lawn covered with sycamore leaves, the anthracnose problem passes with the onset of warm, sunny weather.

Beginning midsummer, sycamores and plane trees begin to shed leaves, and it is not uncommon to find additional leaves on the ground on a daily basis. As summer progresses, it is typical, in fact expected, to find populations of spider mites and lace bugs feeding on leaves. These arthropods contribute to the stippled, bronzed appearance of leaves as summer progresses, and feeding may accelerate leaf fall. Treatment of these leaf-feeders is not recommended due to tree size and because no lasting harm to tree health occurs from them. As fall arrives, it is usual to see entire trees a brownish color well before other trees produce fall color. Leaf drop often accelerates in September and October until branches are finally bare.

Sycamores and plane trees are best suited to large landscapes or parks where their size can be accommodated. Leaf fall can be frustrating in residential areas for neighbors adjacent to a property with even a single tree. The growth habit of the tree along with its litter is reminiscent of riparian areas, and the trees are well suited for informal plantings where a riparian or native feel of the landscape is desired.

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