Photo by Sandy Leaptrott

Finches, like this House Finch photographed recently in a Portland garden, are attracted to the high canopies of trees in the Sycamore family for both foraging and nesting.

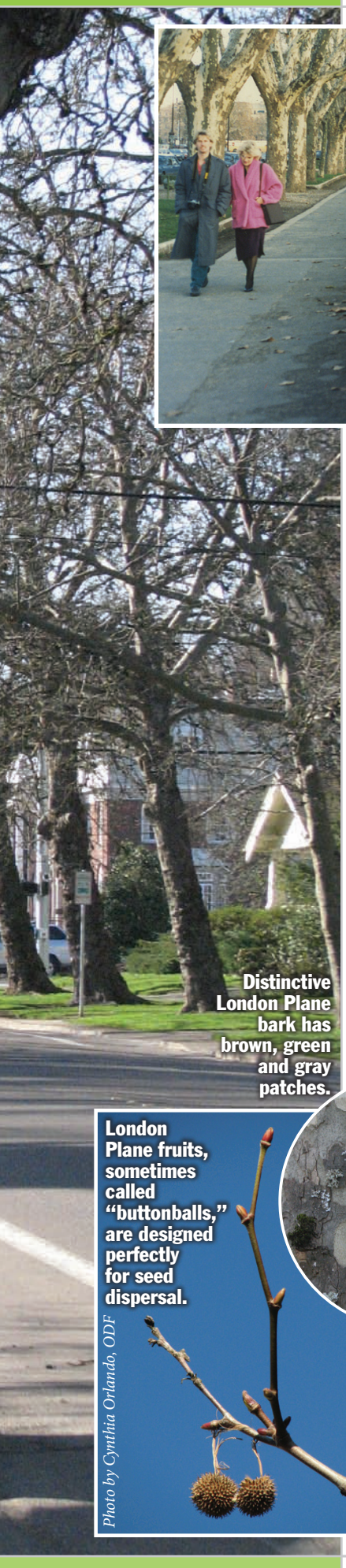
For shade, beauty and vigor, few trees can top London Plane

Cynthia Orlando, ODF Agency Affairs Specialist and certified arborist

The London Plane tree *(Platanus x hispanica (syn. x acerifolia)* is a lovely, large deciduous tree that provides visual interest in winter and great shade in summer. A crossbreed of American sycamore and oriental Plane tree, it can withstand the rigors of urban life, including streets and parking lot islands, and is widely considered to be the world's most reliable city tree.

Photo by Cynthia Orlando, ODF

These stately 70+ year-old London Planes along Jefferson Street in Corvallis were originally planted by professor Leo J. Fairbanks from the art department at Oregon State University, in 1923. Their reputation as attractive shade providers able to withstand urban pollutants make London Plane a popular tree choice along city streets worldwide.



Distinctive London Plane bark has brown, green and gray patches.

Photo by Nancy Romano Bengry

London Plane trees along a boulevard in Rome.

Although called London Plane, this tree is not native to England. In fact, it's not native to anywhere, because it's a hybrid of two trees – the American Sycamore, and the Oriental Planetree – from opposite sides of the globe. Its name reflects the fact that it was widely planted in London during the industrial revolution because of its high tolerance for air pollution.

Today it's found all over London, including Kensington Gardens, and it's popular in France where it graces the avenues of Paris. In the U.S., it grows in most major urban areas including New York City, where it is both the tallest street tree, and Central Park's oldest tree.

Bark and leaves

Besides their great height and large limbs, the bark on these trees is one of their best assets. Their tan-grey or pale grey-green outer bark peels away (exfoliates) in tubular curls and large flakes, revealing patches of white, smooth inner bark. The tree's peeling bark helps it shed damaging pollutants.

London Plane trees are fairly wind-resistant, growing to about 75' – 120' feet in height and providing welcoming shade along streets and boulevards around the world. Leaves are thick, superficially maple-like, broad and palmately lobed. In the spring, young leaves are coated with minute, fine, stiff hairs that wear off by late summer.

London Plane fruits, sometimes called "buttonballs," are designed perfectly for seed dispersal.

Photo by Cynthia Orlando, ODF

Fruit and flowers

Trees have a small fruit that's come to symbolize the sycamore family. "Buttonballs" are about the size of a Swedish meatball and take about six months to mature. Green in the spring, they turn brown in the fall and stay on the tree into the winter. Fruits contain hundreds of seed nutlets (achenes), each with soft fluff tucked inside the ball, perfectly engineered for seed dispersal.

The number of fruits per group is a good clue for guessing the type of planetree: one ball, almost always an American sycamore; two balls, probably London planetree, and three or more, usually oriental planetree. Both the yellow male and reddish female flowers grow on the same tree.

Wood

The wood is fine-grained, hard, tough, and almost impossible to split. Pioneers used it to make wheels for ox carts. Today it's used for furniture, architectural millwork, flooring, veneer, butcher blocks and turnery wood.

History and lore

The main character in Handel's opera *Xerxes* makes a fool of himself in the opening act, pouring out his love as he sings to a plane tree in the aria *"Ombra mai fu,"* ("never sweeter was the shade of any dear and lovable plant.") That may seem a bit excessive, but plane trees do have many fine characteristics to recommend them, including shade and longevity. A tree in the genus *Platanus*, the London Plane hybrid was most likely a natural result of the two parent trees being planted close to each other; it was first recorded as occurring in Spain in the 17th century where Oriental Plane and American Plane had been planted in proximity to one another.

In Oregon, London Plane trees can be found in Salem, Eugene and Corvallis, and dozens of London Planes grow in Portland's downtown Transit Mall where they provide a cooling canopy for pedestrians. In the 70's, project engineers originally built root wells in the basements of downtown properties to accommodate them, basements which often extended under the sidewalk.

"They're a pretty durable tree," says Portland State University's Joe Poracsky, "they're pruned up high, provide good shade and make sense for a pedestrian bus mall."

Use by wildlife

Some bird species including house finches, warblers and Nuttall woodpeckers depend on the

Continued on page 20

ODF geotechnical specialist earns national honors

Kevin Weeks, ODF Agency Affairs Specialist

Photo by Sabrina Reinwald, ODF

L to R: ODF employees Mark Reed, Susan Shaw, and Jason Hinkle. Hinkle was recently recognized for alerting emergency personnel to an impending debris flow at Eilertsen Creek in Columbia County.

Jason Hinkle, Oregon Department of Forestry geotechnical specialist based in Forest Grove, received a special Presidential Citation from the Association of Environmental & Engineering Geologists during the group's national meeting in New Orleans in September.

Hinkle was honored for his work monitoring an abandoned railroad fill near Woodson, Oregon that impounded water following massive rain storms in early December 2007. Upon realizing failure of the rail grade was imminent and the debris flow that would likely follow, Hinkle urgently alerted local emergency management officials and the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) to advise that local homeowners required evacuation and a shut down of U.S. Highway 30 was needed.

Ninety minutes after the highway was closed, the fill collapsed, releasing several thousand cubic feet of debris down Eilertsen Creek and burying Highway 30 for several days. No injuries resulted from the debris flow.

"I was extremely honored to receive such recognition from my peers," said Hinkle. "However, I was simply doing my job and I expect that my peers would have acted the same in similar circumstances. There were also a number of other people who played equally important roles that day including the landowners, the excavator operator and others who worked to mitigate the impending failure, ODF personnel, ODOT personnel, and homeowners that heeded the evacuation warnings. I feel like I accepted the award on their behalf, as well."

Hinkle serves as the Oregon section president for the Association of Environmental & Engineering Geologists.

Featured Tree . . . Continued from page 19

high canopy of trees in the Sycamore family for nesting sites, and to forage for insects like aphids. The seedballs found on the London Plane are a favorite of red-tailed hawks, juncos, purple finches, goldfinches and squirrels. Cavity-nesting birds such as flycatchers and owls will sometimes nest inside the nearly hollow trunks of older trees.

Pests and disease

An insect commonly damaging these trees is the sycamore lacebug. These insects feed on the undersides of the leaves, causing a stippled appearance and premature leaf loss in late summer. American plum borer, a caterpillar that often feeds near bark wounds, is another insect to watch for.

A major foliage disease of sycamores is anthracnose, a potentially serious disease that causes severe dieback of both emerging stems and foliage. Fortunately, several cultivars of London Plane have some resistance. Other common pests and health issues include powdery mildew (a fungus), cankers, and leaf scorch.

Planting and care

These trees transplant readily, and tolerate a wide range of conditions including a variety of soil types, restricted root space, soil compaction and air pollution. Plant the tree where it has plenty of room to spread and won't interfere with power lines. Prune in the winter.

Since these trees are often planted on city streets with poor soil or limited rooting space, regular watering, fertilizer and mulching are all recommended. However, if planted in parks or backyards with good soil with ample room for roots and crown to grow, less vigilance is required.