

Hedge Apples

Written by Barbara Wagner
Erie County Master Gardener

Some trees are not lawn friendly. Black walnuts with large 1-2 inch nuts and sweetgum with sticky balls are examples. Another example is Osage Orange or hedge apple.

Hedge apple, *maclura pomifera*, native to Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma, is not an apple tree. It is a deciduous tree with spiny thorns that was brought to other states to use as a hedge in place of fences.

Nor is hedge apple, Osage Orange, related to orange trees. Missouri Botanical Gardens places it in the fig family. The name Osage came from its popularity and native range in the territory where the Osage Native Americans lived. The orange comes from the orangish color on the bark and heartwood and the fruit which are as big as oranges.

Ohio Trees calls the hedge apple a small tree of 20 to 40 feet in height with a trunk diameter of 4 to 12 inches. It grows primarily in open fields or along fence rows and is tolerant of drought and clay soils.

The leaves of the tree are simple and alternate, smooth long ovals with pointed ends. They are dark green on top and paler underneath. They grow from 2-5 inches long and 1 ½ to 3 inches wide. The leaves turn yellow in the fall.

The bark of the tree is light green to light brown on younger trees. On older trees the trunks have deep dark orange furrows. The heartwood also reveals the orange color.

Missouri Botanical Gardens tells how the Native Americans prized the tree for its wood which is “long-lasting, durable, and tough.” Native Americans used it for bows and war clubs which gave it the common name of bowwood.

The tree was brought to the northern states to be used as a hedge. The stems are thorny with single spines of ¼ to an inch long at some nodes. According to Missouri Botanical Gardens, the tree “suckers freely and forms an impenetrable barrier due to its vicious thorns” This usage as a hedge decreased with the advent of barb wire. The stems also contain a milky sap that may irritate the skin.

But it is the fruit that makes the tree unfriendly to clean lawns. Hedge apples are dioecious with female and male trees. Only the females bear the fruit. It is possible to have only male trees and have no fruit.

Both male and female trees have yellowish not very showy flowers. Ohio Trees describe the male flowers as a “linear cluster or catkin.” The female flowers

are “round balls that are 1 inch in diameter.” These female flowers yield the fruit, rough bright green balls the size of oranges.

The fruit matures in fall and is definitely a hazard for walking and mowing. I have seen my brother collect several wheelbarrows full of these hedge apples. If not cleaned up, the fruit can also give off a disagreeable odor.

Urbanorganic yield.com calls the fruit inedible “not because of its ugly taste and appearance but because of the latex the fruit secretes that can irritate the human skin.” This article states that anything that can hurt the skin can hurt the insides. The seeds, however, can be eaten if soaked for 24 hours. The apples have been eaten by horses earning them another name, horse apple.

There is some thought that hedge apples are insect repellents and I have been told that putting them in my garage would repel spiders. Iowa State University Extension in an article “Hedge Apples for Home Pest Control?” discusses this issue.

Their research found that there are chemicals in the fruit that repel German cockroaches, mosquitoes and houseflies. If the hedge apples were sliced and put in a small enclosed place, they did repel insects, but not necessarily spiders, and putting whole fruit around the house or in the basement would have little effect.

So a male hedge apple tree might be a good shade tree. [Ohio Trees](#) mentions that there is a selection known as White Sword that is thornless and fruitless and “should make an outstanding urban tree.” And the tree does produce hard durable wood. But for most of us it is fun to look at but not a choice for our landscape.