Native to the northeastern United States and eastern Canada, *Acer pensylvanicum* brings beautiful bark and fall color to the Northwest garden. The tree has many common names, including striped maple and striped-bark maple. Young trunks and branches are olive green with beautiful white and jade-green vertical striping. These stripes can fade as the wood ages, and the bark may turn brown; however, I’ve seen the striping persist on large trunks, plus the stripes continue to appear on newer, younger limbs and branches.

Because moose and deer browse the twigs and leaves, another common name for the tree is moosewood. Those of us of a certain age remember the vegetarian cookbook from the Moosewood Restaurant in Ithaca, New York—in the heart of moosewood country. The book, still beloved today, could be found on the shelf of many kitchens after its publication in 1974. The restaurant
The Only Non-Asian Snakebark Maple

Linnaeus gave this *Acer* its species name and managed to misspell it, too, as the name is a reference to Pennsylvania, one of the states where the tree grows wild.

The smooth, striped, reptilian-like bark on *Acer pensylvanicum* puts it in a taxonomic section of the genus *Acer* called *Macrantha*, the snakebark maples. This group is made up of about 20 species, and *A. pensylvanicum* is the only one of them that’s found in North America. The rest are restricted to eastern Asia. You’ll find stunning specimens of many of the snakebark maples in the Dan Hinkley Asian Maple Collection at the Arboretum, including Honshu maple (*Acer rufinerve*) from Japan and Kawakami maple (*Acer caudatifolium*) from Taiwan.

Adapted to Shade

An understory tree, *Acer pensylvanicum* grows in moist forests in its home range, preferring shaded slopes and valleys. It is among the most shade-tolerant of deciduous trees and will actually suffer if planted in full sun. In the wild, the tree can get up to 40 feet high and more, but in cultivation, striped maple typically reaches a height of 15 to 25 feet and a spread of 12 to 20 feet.

The leaves are large for a snakebark maple, growing up to seven inches long. Each one has three lobes and resembles the shape of a goose’s foot, giving the tree another one of its common names: goosefoot maple. The foliage emerges in spring with a pink hue, turns to dark green by summer, and then changes to bright yellow in the autumn before dropping. Yellow flowers on six-inch racemes appear in May, followed by winged samaras.

Recent research has shown that the species is a sequential hermaphrodite, meaning that it can change its sex during its lifetime to bear either male or female flowers. Why would a tree do this? One possible scenario is that a dying or sick male tree switches its flowers to female so that it can produce offspring as quickly as possible.

In the Arboretum

The Washington Park Arboretum has several specimens of *Acer pensylvanicum*. The oldest dates to 1944 and can be found at the top of the Hybrid Rhododendron Garden, at the western edge of the Asian Maple Collection. The tree has had a hard life, losing part of its trunk in a windstorm, with the remaining trunk nearly horizontal now. However, it is still producing new, colorful branches and putting on a lovely fall foliage display.

The rest of the specimens are young (under 20 years old) and in good shape. Two are nearby, just south of the Magnolia Collection, along the upper Lookout Loop Trail. Dating to 2009, they came to us from the Rhododendron Species Botanical Garden. Another easy one to find is the specimen growing among the tree peonies along Arboretum Drive. This specimen, and another nearby, date to 2006 and came to us from the Arnold Arboretum.

In the home garden, striped maple is a great small tree for a moist, partially shaded spot. It will even tolerate deep shade, but will make a break for it if an overhead space opens up. The fascinating bark adds winter interest to a woodland garden, and the yellow fall color adds a bright note to gray Northwest skies.

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The young specimen in the tree peony collection along Arboretum Drive.