

PATHWAY UNDER THE SYCAMORES

In the mid-19th century, land surveyors hiking beside Upper Penitencia Creek described an abundance of great sycamore trees and saplings. The creek supported a green, lush and mixed riparian corridor with multiple tree species. Eight historical survey maps showed that vegetation included madrone, live oaks, maples and willows. Of the documented trees, more than 75 percent were sycamores.

Today, the Western sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*) is still one of the largest and easily recognized trees alongside the creek, with its peeling white bark. This area is one of the last remaining old-growth Western sycamore groves in the South Bay. A few of the trees with trunk diameters of more than 35 inches date back to California's Gold Rush.

In the urban landscape of the Silicon Valley, most trees that look like Western sycamores are actually London plane trees (*Platanus x acerifolia*), not native to California. Genetically altered by humans to grow smaller than the Western sycamores and not to lose branches, London plane trees have come to reproduce by pollinating with native Western sycamores, creating a new hybrid population. This unfortunately decreases the chance for more native Western sycamore trees to dominate our local watersheds as they have for centuries.

Fortunately by Penitencia Creek, native Western sycamores still provide a broad canopy of wide leaves, shading and cooling waters for the steelhead trout that spawn in the creek. Able to sprout almost 100 feet in 25 years, the Western sycamore drops many limbs into the creek, providing habitat for aquatic creatures. The voids in the trunk open homes for raccoons and opossums, while songbirds and raptors nest in the sycamore's remaining foliage and feed on its dangling seed balls.

Acorn woodpecker

Raccoon

Cooper's hawk

Yellow-rumped warbler

Pacific tree frog

CROSS-SECTION OF ELEVATED BOARDWALK

Sycamore leaves and seed balls

Sycamore roots stay intact

The Western sycamore is so critical in maintaining the creek-side environment that special attention was given to design the trail with elevated boardwalk segments along these special trees. Digging was kept to a minimum so as to not impact root systems and to spare five of the oldest sycamores. The elevated walkways allow the soil underneath the air and water needed to remain healthy. The boardwalks span the most sensitive areas of this historic grove of Western sycamores.