**Maclura pomifera (Raf.) Schneid.**  
Osage orange

*The Osage orange was already in cultivation outside its natural range when Lewis saw it in St Louis. It would soon become the most commonly planted tree in the settlers' farms, and was brought to the gardens of the eastern United States as one of the discoveries of the Lewis and Clark expedition.*

As soon as he reached St Louis, Lewis came across plants new to him. In a letter to Jefferson dated March 26, 1804, he tells how he found a few “Osage apple” and “Osage’s plum” in the garden of the prominent fur trader Pierre Chouteau (1758-1849) and how he asked Chouteau to give him details about the origin of his trees. Thought to be native to the west, and present day southern Mississippi, Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Texas, the Osage orange had already moved a long way eastward owing to contacts between Indians and traders. Five years earlier (1799) Chouteau had obtained a few young trees in an Osage village, from an Indian who himself had gotten them 300 miles away (Lewis, March 26, 1804).
The qualities of the Osage orange wood, durable and with exceptional strength and elasticity at the same time, made the tree extremely valuable to the Osage Indians. The bows and arrows they crafted from this wood were highly prized in the extensive exchange networks among Indian groups, and a bow was equivalent to one horse and a blanket in trade (Hatch 2003).

This tree normally grows to a height of 25 to 30 feet, but early settlers soon learned to trim the Osage orange to make thick, dense natural hedges for their corral enclosures. Before the invention of barbed wire, this became the most commonly planted tree in the US. The seeds reached fairly high prices on mid-19th century rural markets. The odoriferous, tough, inedible fruit of the Osage orange was also part of the tree’s appeal when displayed in homes to serve as insect repellent. Because Chouteau’s trees were immature, Lewis did not see them bearing either flowers or fruit. His detailed description of the fruit is based on Chouteau’s relation of the Indians’ “extravagant account of the exquisite odor of this fruit when it has obtained maturity” (Lewis, March 26, 1804 in Thwaites 1959).

Maclura aurantiaca [Maclura pomifera], Osage orange in Nuttall’s Sylva
Photo Smithsonian Institution

"Lewis and Clark as Naturalists" website
http://www.mnh.si.edu/lewisandclark/index.html?loc=/lewisandclark/home.html
The Osage orange also became valuable as an ornamental tree. The seeds and cuttings that Lewis took from Chouteau's trees were successfully grown by Thomas Jefferson in Monticello and by two nurserymen from Philadelphia, Bernard McMahon and David Hamilton. In the mid-19th century, Osage orange was offered in Robert Carr's catalogs, for its "beautiful foliage and curious fruit" (Cutright 1969: 374). Several trees allegedly grown from these early seedlings are still standing. A large specimen on the Washington River Farm in Alexandria, Virginia is believed to be Jefferson’s gift to the Washington family, and St Peter's Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, formerly the site of McMahon's garden, displays a row of Osage oranges in the churchyard.

Read Lewis’s letter to Jefferson

When making final preparations for the expedition in St Louis, Lewis shipped his first box of specimens with cuttings of the Osage orange to Jefferson. Click on the link to read Lewis’s description in his accompanying letter of March 26, 1804.

*Maclura aurantiaca* [Maclura pomifera], Osage orange in Nuttall’s *Sylva*
Photo Smithsonian Institution
Bibliography


Internet Resources


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