

by William J. Stevens - edited version of article which appeared in the May 2000 Newsletter

The Osage Orange (*Maclura pomifera*) tree is sometimes referred to as a hedge apple and is quite rare in the Carolinian forest area of Southern Ontario. There are a few locations in Niagara where they exist, but the best example I know of is the hedge row along the south edge of the road side ditch of the main drive into Brock University which is the extension of St. David's Road. The tree is not native to Canada; a few early pioneer settlers brought it into Canada. The tree only grows to about 30 feet in height here, although slightly higher in the southern USA. It is thought that the tree was first found in Oklahoma and Texas and named after the Osage tribe of that area. The Native Americans used the branches for bows, as the wood is very elastic and does not easily rot as it is a very strong and dense wood. The trunk of the tree has lots of low branches which have sharp inch long thorns at the base of the leaves. It is this feature that prompted the pioneers to grow these trees in rows in order to keep their animals confined to their fields and also provide a wind break. The branches being low and the thick bark prevented cows from destroying the trees by rubbing their backs on the trunks as with several other tree varieties. Planting a hedgerow of Osage Orange trees was very easy for settlers, as they grew quickly and shoots grow from fallen fruit on their own. There are male and female trees and this is needed to produce the fruit. The fruit look like deformed oranges or scrambled brains and are greenish orange in colour. The fruit is not edible. The fruit is quite hard until rotten, and smells like orange peel. It contains citronella a natural insect repellent and settlers used them for that purpose. They were tucked into bedding areas to repel insects and they were used as moth repellent as well. They were gathered and dried to a hard ball and used until the next crop in the late fall. As I mentioned only a few of these trees remain in Southern Ontario and the few that remain are a forgotten reminder of early nineteenth century farm life