

Cooking with a stick epitomizes the whole camping experience. Some folks think picking out a good stick to roast hot dogs or marshmallows is as simple as cutting off a suitable switch from the first tree you find. They believe that one of appropriate length and strength is all you need. If you believe that...you are not truly a woodsman, and more importantly you may put yourself at risk. You might do better if you know what you are getting (or not getting, as the case may be).

Taste

Some tree species have sap that adds unpleasant taste to foods roasted on the open fire. Many pine species contain terpene (used to derive turpentine), which often doesn't taste good on a dog. Redcedar contains chemicals that make the wood insect and decay resistant...not attributes known for tasting good. Many oaks and hickories contain tannin that can add a bitter taste.

Poison

Some woody plants are poisonous...not just to the touch like poison ivy or poison oak, but some species such as black cherry and other species in the plum family contain cyanide. Some woody plants such as those in the horse chestnut family (like yellow buckeye) can actually be fatal! Other common plants containing poison include laurel-cherry, red mulberry, American elder and most species of rhododendron.

Impact

Truth is you can't just go whacking off a limb from a tree...

- ☛ What if it was a prized black walnut whose lumber fetches thousands of dollars for a top tree!
- ☛ What if the limb you just lopped off was from the tree where our forefathers signed an important treaty...a historically significant tree?
- ☛ What if you just cut down a flowering dogwood sapling here in NC where that tree is the state flower (protected by law!)
- ☛ What if you are in a state park or designated protected area...better bring your own stick.
- ☛ Or what if the tree is so susceptible to insect and disease that it only takes a single broken limb to open up to infection.

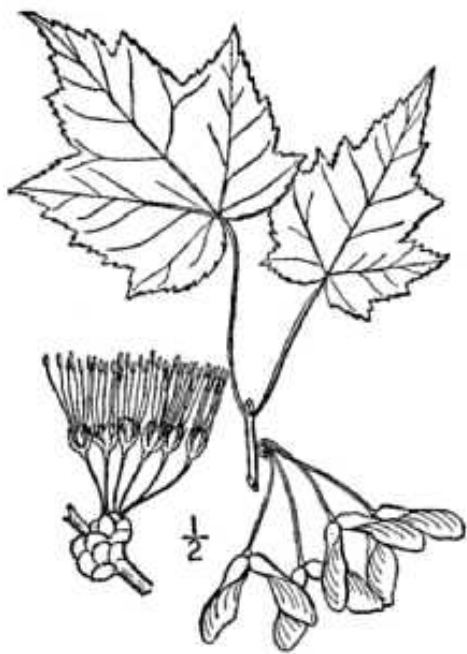
What *Should* You Use?

Now let's say you find yourself in a place where you can pick up a stick or cut one, what do you look for. First, you need a tree that grows in a variety of habitats, is fast growing and produces lots of saplings. That way you limit your impact. Next, you want one that doesn't contain chemicals that might make you sick, nor add unwanted taste to your hotdog or marshmallow. For a tree guy like me...that describes three species: red maple (*Acer rubrum*) and sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*), tulip-poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*)...see next page for details.

Finding Your Prized Cooking Stick

Locating one of these trees is not difficult once you learn how to identify them. Below are some simple drawings and pictures. Of the 3 species, I prefer sweetgum simply because it is easiest to identify with it's "prickly" gumballs and star-shaped leaves (see next page for details).

Red Maple



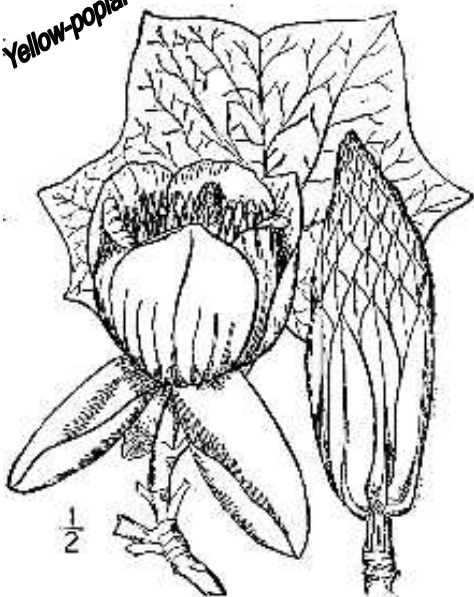
Red maple - this small to medium sized tree is the most common tree species in the eastern U.S. It grows from Maine to Texas in a variety of habitats from dry upland woods to rich, moist bottomland forest. There is even a swamp variety (not that you would ever wind up in a swamp to cook your dogs and 'smores). Red maple grows fast and has few pests, so cutting a sapling won't hurt it...it will sprout again. Being common place the will be easy to find.

Sweetgum - Like red maple sweetgum is a common tree growing on a wide variety habitats from bottomland forest to moist and dry



uplands. It sprouts readily and you can often find "thickets" of sapling sweetgum perfect for using as a cooking stick. Interesting, sap is a legitimate antiseptic. The gummy resin or "balsam" can be chewed for flavor, used to make perfume and incense, or used medicinally. Native Americans used boiled leaves as well as balsam to treat wounds. So not only will this work as a great hotdog stick, it might heal what ails you!

Yellow-poplar



Yellow-poplar - also known as tulip-poplar or tuliptree, can grow quite large. Like the other two species described above, it is very common and grows in a variety of habitats. It normally grows very straight and can be found growing as a "thicket" just like sweetgum. Since the wood of yellow-poplar is sometimes used for wooden cooking implements, you know it will make a great hot dog or marshmallow stick. The leaves can also be used to make a cup...but I'll save that for another time.

Picture Source:

USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database / Britton, N.L., and A. Brown. 1913. *Illustrated flora of the northern states and Canada*. Vol. 2: 235.