

Pennsylvania-German Names of Trees

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The study of the Pennsylvania-German names of trees is very interesting, especially since a number of these vernacular names are so different from those of the original high German that it is often difficult to recognize them as being derived from the latter. A great many of the original settlers of eastern Pennsylvania came from the country districts in southwestern Germany, bringing with them popular names for trees and other useful plants, which they gave to closely related forms found growing in America. Many of these names have survived till today. The word **Kesten**, which is a variant name for **Kastania**, the original high German word, being derived from the name of the territory of Castanea, in Thessaly, is an example of an introduced name. **Grum Beeren**, derived from **Grund Beeren**, is a word in common use in southwestern Germany for Kartoffeln (potatoes), which, although not a tree, serves to illustrate the use of names in vogue in the fatherland. The English element that is scattered throughout the German speaking districts in Pennsylvania has also left its imprint upon plant names, as is shown in words like **Shaelbark**, the first part of which is distinctly German, meaning "to peel off," and the second name is English. Combinations of this kind are not infrequent.

Of course there are still a number of trees and shrubs growing in this part of the state for which no vernacular names exist, while a great many others are given a general term. The different oaks, for instance, are seldom distinguished beyond the two kinds, namely, the white (**weiss Oeche**) and black (**swartz Oeche**). The high German name for oak is **Eiche** of which **Oeche** is a corruption. The white oak, swamp white oak, post oak, and dwarf chinquapin oak are all classed under the general name **weiss Oeche**. Red oak, scarlet oak, yellow oak, pin oak, and black jack are all known as **swartz Oeche**. The most noted exceptions are the chestnut oak (**Quercus prinus Linn.**), which is called **kest Oeche**, and red oak (**Quercus rubra Linn.**), which is sometimes called **roth Oeche**, but the latter is also used occasionally to designate the group of oaks above classed under **swartz Oeche**.

A short list of Pennsylvania-German names is given below:

Penna.-German Name	English Common Name	Botanical Name
Juglandaceae		
Oel Walnuss	Butternut	<i>Juglans cinerea</i> Linn.
Walnuss	Black walnut	<i>Juglans nigra</i> Linn.
Saeu Hickernuss	Pignut	<i>Hicoria glabra</i> (Mill.) Brit.
Weiser Hickernuss	Mockernut	<i>Hicoria alba</i> (Linn.) Brit.
Shaelbark	Shellbark	<i>Hicoria ovata</i> (Mill.) Brit.
Salicaceae		
Weide	Willow	<i>Salix nigra</i> Marsh
Trauer Weide	Weeping willow	<i>Salix babylonica</i> Linn.

The popular name of the shag bark is drawn from the striking appearance of its outer bark, which peels off in long narrow strips.

Aside from the weeping willow, which is an introduced species, the Pennsylvania-Germans recognize only one kind. There are about eight or ten species native to eastern Pennsylvania, but they are not distinguished and are simply called **Weide**, or occasionally **wasser Weide** or **Bruch-Weide**. The latter is the high German name for crack willow, *Salix fragilis* Linn., and should not be used as a general term.

Salicaceae (Continued)

Bopple	Lombardy	<i>Populus nigra italica</i> Du Roi.
Weiser Bopple	European white poplar	<i>Populus alba</i> Linn.
Aspen	Quaking aspen	<i>Populus tremuloides</i> Mich.
Grosse Bopple	Large-toothed aspen	<i>Populus grandidentata</i> Mich.

Betulaceae

Suess Birch	Sweet birch	<i>Betula lenta</i> Linn.
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The German and English names for this tree are so nearly alike that it did not take long for the Pennsylvania-German to drop the hard sound of **k** in the German name **Birke** in favor of the soft sound, **ch** in the English name birch. The Teutonic name for this tree was **Berka**, whence it is easy to see how **Birke** and **Birch** came to be used later. The kind generally found along streams or in wet locations is called wasser Birch (*Betula nigra* Linn.) Other species are seldom distinguished.

Airle	European alder	<i>Alnus glutinosa</i> (Linn.) Gaertn.
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Fagaceae

Buche	Beech	<i>Fagus atropunicea</i> (Marsh.) Sudworth.
Kesten	Chestnut	<i>Castanea dentata</i> (Marsh.) Borkh.
Weiss Oeche	White oak	<i>Quercus alba</i> Linn.
Swartz Oeche	Yellow oak	<i>Quercus velutina</i> Lam.
Roth Oeche	Red oak	<i>Quercus rubra</i> Linn.
Kest Oeche	Chestnut oak	<i>Quercus prinus</i> Linn.

Ulmaceae

Ulm	American elm	<i>Ulmus americana</i> Linn.
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The word **Ulm** is the high German name for the European elm (*Ulmus campestris* Linn.), and is now generally applied to the American elm (*Ulmus americana* Linn.). **Roosche** is a name occasionally given to this tree in sections of Pennsylvania where the English speaking element has not yet replaced a great many of the German names formerly in use. It is derived from the middle high German **Ruester**. (not Ruestar), and is used as a general term for all species of elms.

Schlupefrige Al	Slippery elm	<i>Ulmus pubescens</i> Walt.
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The name **Al** is derived from European base meaning to grow or to nourish. The inner bark of this species has a very agreeable taste and aromatic odor when dry. Children frequently gather the bark and chew it, and it also has long played an important part in medicine, and among the Pennsylvania German people at the present day old apothecaries still attribute to it its ancient repute.

Moraceae

Weise Maul Beeren	White mulberry	<i>Morus rubra</i> Linn.
Swartz Maul Beeren	Red mulberry	<i>Toxylon pomiferum</i> Raf.
Hedge Baum or		
Wilde orange Baum	Osage orange	<i>Morus alba</i> Linn.

Magnoliaceae

Tulpen or Popple	Yellow poplar	<i>Liriodendron tulipifera</i> Linn.
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Lauraceae

Sassafras	Sassafras	<i>Sassafras sassafras</i> (Linn.) Karst.
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On account of the aromatic odor of this tree it was supposed by the early German settlers to possess a great many medicinal virtues. It is said that the

women employed the berries of sassafras trees against pain by washing the aching parts with a solution obtained by boiling the berries in water. The bark of this tree was formerly used by the women in dyeing worsted a fine lasting orange color which is said not to have faded in the sun. The early settlers also gathered the flowers which were carefully dried in the shade to serve as a substitute for tea.

Hamamelidaceae

Suess Gumme	Sweet gum	<i>Liquidambar styraciflua</i> Linn.
Wasser Beech	Sycamore	<i>Platanus occidentalis</i> Linn.

This tree has a very confusing list of Pennsylvania-German names. The wood of sycamore has a rather close resemblance to that of beech, and since the tree is generally found along streams it is often called **wasser Beech**. The German, however, corrupted the word to **wasser Pitsch**, and from this it was still further misnamed until today it is frequently called **wasser Pitcher**. The German ear is not very keen in detecting clearly certain aspirants, as for instance the **b** and **p** or **d** and **t**, and it is therefore easy to see how the word became corrupted from **beech** to **Pitch** and later to **Pitcher**. The term **wasser Pitcher** has a local usage and is not likely to find favor even among the most careless users of Pennsylvania-German plant names. It is also occasionally referred to as **bolle Baum** or **knoep Baum**, but these also are only local names.

Leguminosae

Locus	Locust	<i>Robinia pseudacacia</i> Linn.
Honig Locus	Honey Locust	<i>Gleditsia triacanthos</i>

Aceraceae

Ahorn	Red maple	<i>Acer rubrum</i> Linn.
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The red maple is one of the most common native species of eastern Pennsylvania, and it is seldom that any other name except **maple** is given to this tree. Occasionally one hears the word **rother** or **feld Ahorn**. The silver maple so generally cultivated is sometimes called **spitz-blaettriger Ahorn**.

Hippocastanaceae

Gaels Kesten	Horse chestnut	<i>Aesculus hippocastanum</i> Linn.
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Tiliaceae

Linde	Linden	<i>Tilia americana</i> Linn.
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Cornaceae

Hundsholz	Dogwood	<i>Cornus florida</i> Linn.
Gumme Baum	Black gum	<i>Nyssa sylvatica</i> Marsh.

Ebenaceae

Sparveln	Persimmon	<i>Diospyros virginiana</i> Linn.
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The generic name of this tree is derived from **dios**, divine, and **pyros**, pear; resemblance of the fruit. The high German name for this tree is **Dattelpflaume**, a term which does not seem to have come into use in this country. **Dattel** is the German word for **date**, and **pflaume** for **plum**.

Oleaceae

Aesche	American ash	<i>Fraxinus americana</i> Linn.
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The popular high German name is usually written **Esche**, derived from the original Teutonic word **Ask-oz**. The Pennsylvania Germans have not as yet generally distinguished the several species of ashes native to eastern Pennsylvania, except that the ordinary white ash (*Fraxinus americana* Linn.) is occasionally referred to as **weiser Aesche** in order to distinguish it from the **wasser Aesche**, which is the black ash (*Fraxinus nigra* Marsh.), a species generally found in low swampy situations.

Caprifoliaceae

Swartzer Huller	Black elder	<i>Sambucus canadensis</i> Linn.
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The common elder (*Sambucus racemosa* Linn.) native to central and southern Europe is called **Hohlunder** in German. When the early German settlers came to America they found black elder, which they straightway called **swartzer Hohlunder**, which was soon corrupted to **swartzer Huller**.

Schaaf Beeren

Sheep berries

Viburnum lentago Linn.

