

San Juan Island

National Historical park
Washington
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

The Bigleaf maples of English Camp

Among the many constants at English Camp — long before this beautiful spot on Garrison Bay became so named — have been the Bigleaf maple trees, located between the Barracks and the Formal Garden.

They were here when Native Americans were still gathering and shucking clams on the bay shore, adding the shells to middens piled like snowdrifts against the walls of their plank houses.

They were here when the British Royal Marines arrived in March 1860 and doffed their scarlet tunics to plant vegetables, then rest under the boughs.

In fact, they have been here so long that the massive specimen located nearest the Formal Garden at one time was proclaimed the "World's largest Bigleaf maple."

However, between 1969 and 1978, two major branches broke and crashed to the ground, thereby reducing the tree's spread and removing it from contention as the world's largest.

The tree may still lay claim to being one of the world's "oldest" Bigleaf maple. In 1966 an increment bore/core sample was taken and the tree's age was determined to be 293 years old. That makes it 323 years-old in 1996, and still going strong.

The Bigleaf next to the barracks is actually a cluster of several trees that have grown together over the centuries. It may not number among the biggest in the world, but this maple is certainly one of the most beloved on the island — particularly among the tree-climbing set. As irresistible as it may seem, *please* remember climbing will wear down the bark and shorten its life.

About Bigleaf Maple *Acer macrophyllum*

Bigleaf maples are found in coastal lowlands from just south of the Alaska Panhandle in British Columbia, through the western sections of Washington and Oregon. Further south in the warmer, drier California climate, it is located only in moist canyons at increasing elevations in the coast ranges and the Sierra Nevada range. It is most abundant west of the Cascade Divide from southern



The Bigleaf maple at English camp was once the world's champion.

British Columbia to southern Oregon, from sea level to 3,000 feet (where it reaches its best development).

Mature Bigleaf maples that have been growing in the open normally have squat trunks, 3 to 4 feet thick and support massive, spreading limbs. Examples range from 70 to 80 feet high and are nearly as broad. They live an average 200 years or more (as is the case with the English Camp tree). Located in forests among other varieties, Bigleafs will grow straight and tall, as high as 100 feet, with a loose crown of upward pointing branches, often forked or with several trunks close together.

A Rich Foliage

Bigleaf maples are easy to recognize from other maples because of their giant leaves (8 to 12 inches across), with five deeply cut lobes. The lobes have smooth margins, except for a few large blunt teeth. Leaf stalks are 6 to 12 inches long and unlike other maples, secrete a milky sap when broken.

In late April and early May, while new leaves are opening, clusters of fragrant yellow blossoms (4 to 6 inches long) hang from the boughs. And all year round, thick moss and ferns

cling to the rough trunk and lower limbs.

The wood of this species is valued for dimension lumber and fuel. The heartwood is a light reddish-brown in color, fine-grained, moderately heavy, hard and strong. It will take a high polish and is known for grain patterns similar to Curly or Bird's Eye maple.

How Are World Champion Trees Determined?

World champions are determined by a point system based on height, trunk size and crown spread.

By this formula, the English Camp tree earned 417 points in 1966, when it became world champion. The loss of the first big limb in 1969 did not affect its status or result in loss of title. It lost its title in 1969 to a Polk County, Oregon tree (428 points).

Today's champion (440 points) is located in Jewell, Oregon, which has relegated the English Camp tree to third place or possibly lower. However, its crown, before the 1969 limb loss, is still the largest on record.

Current status awaits submittal of data to the National Register of Big Trees, American Forestry Association.