

Virginia Native: *Acer negundo* (boxelder)

Compiled by: Anna Aquino

Dirty, untidy, dull, bad, ugly, junk, weedy, nuisance, weak, insignificant, trash, undistinguished, unsightly, problematic— these descriptors have shadowed *Acer negundo* for too long. Could we dispense with them, recognizing they are the detritus of an outdated way of thinking from a bygone natural world where we judged trees for ornamentation, for “what can you do for me, tree?” With climate change bearing down, bulldozer invasive plants, extreme habitat loss, and dark skies looming (reference bird and insect apocalypses), chewed leaves, broken branches, and irregular canopies are meaningless decorative dressings. A tree’s contributions to healthy and thriving ecosystems are what is essential. While we are at it, the many publications still listing the contact and systemic insecticides available to correct “bothersome and aesthetically displeasing” visual imperfections assigned to the moths, caterpillars, beetles, and loads of other insects that routinely inhabit box elder can just stop. Leaves grow back. To paraphrase Doug Tallamy, the entomologist credited with galvanizing our recognition that native plants and insects are essential to food webs and life on earth, “we used to look at nature for how it can be pretty for us, now we must look at nature for how it can function for us to save our natural world.”

Box elder is host to upwards of 300 species of moths and butterflies, including the banded hairstreak, the maple twig borer moth, the Eastern box elder twig borer moth, the Northern box elder twig borer moth, the American dagger moth, the banded tussock moth, and perhaps the prize of the box elder—the rosy maple moth. 90% of our songbirds rely on caterpillars and insects to fledge their nestlings, conveying great import on the lowly box elder.



Photo: Rosy Maple Moth by Jason Ondreicka (iStock)

A bulldog species, box elder is able to take hold in leftover, disturbed, and damaged places, readily handling extremes of wet and dry, of cold and hot, of pH, of soil

compaction, and general degradation, all consequences of the modern built environment. There is just about no environmental challenge it cannot meet, including securing footholds to forestall invasive plant encroachment.

Messy? Partly attributed to their crazy chandelier-like staminate flowers on the male trees and the pistillate flowers on the female trees. In a new light, consider the high pollen and nectar value of these tassels of flowers especially for early native bee pollinators often facing a dearth of food resources. The so-called unsightly ripe samaras may stack up on the ground or persist on the female trees and stay tasty deep into winter, they once again are providing relished food resources for songbirds and game birds, squirrels, chipmunks, foxes, white-tailed deer, and more. Box elder loves bright sunshine and will abscise lateral branches if unable to adequately capture it; how nice that the dining animals are offered convenient lodging in the resulting crannies and cavities. And if you're still not convinced of their dignity, prehistoric Anasazi flutes were recovered from caves in Arizona, dating to 620 to 670 AD, made of none other than our box elder. Please enjoy [here](#).



Photo above: Boxelder by Anna Aquino