

Smart Stuff

with Twig Walkingstick



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
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EXTENSION
OHIO AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH
AND DEVELOPMENT CENTER

For the week of
Nov. 9, 2008

Q. Dear Twig: All right, I'll ask. What eats Osage oranges?

A. Osage oranges, the fruit of the Osage-orange tree, aren't in fact oranges. Maybe you remember that from last week or the week before.

And while people eat Osage orange relatives — the fibery **fig**, the tasty **mulberry**, the giant green tropical **breadfruit**, the just as green and even gianter (as big as a watermelon!) tropical **jackfruit** — they don't eat Osage oranges. The flesh is said to be bitter. I haven't tried it myself. It's not super-poisonous — a plus — but still might make you puke — a minus.

Animal-wise, **deer, birds, horses and squirrels**, to name a few, have been seen eating Osage oranges, either the flesh or the seeds inside. But experts disagree on how much the animals actually eat, how often they do it and even if they do it at all.

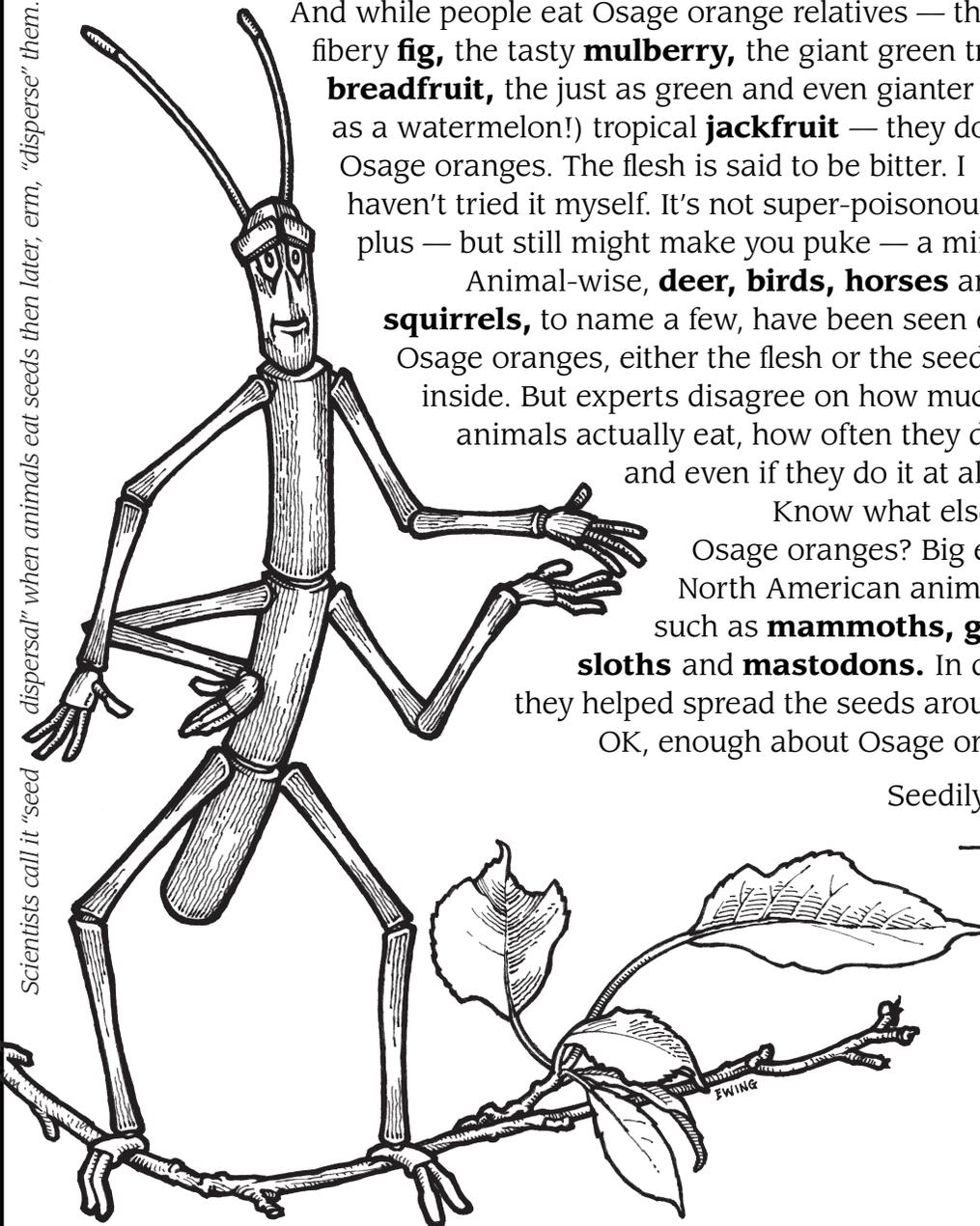
Know what else ate Osage oranges? Big extinct North American animals such as **mammoths, ground sloths** and **mastodons**. In doing it they helped spread the seeds around.

OK, enough about Osage oranges.

Seedily,

Twig

Scientists call it "seed dispersal" when animals eat seeds then later, erm, "disperse" them.



From your scientific friends at The Ohio State University — specifically, the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (www.oardc.ohio-state.edu) and OSU Extension (extension.osu.edu).

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Notes: Scientists think those big extinct North American animals — not only mammoths, ground sloths and mastodons but camels, horses, stag moose and glyptodonts — might have been the Osage-orange tree's vital "dispersal partners." That is, the tree evolved to have those creatures eat its fruit and spread its seeds. Some seeds would end up in a good place to grow; the species would survive or even spread. There's a very cool book called *The Ghosts of Evolution* by Connie Barlow that talks about this. Some of the details about what eats Osage oranges came from a U.S. Forest Service Web site: <http://www.fs.fed.us/database/feis/plants/tree/macpom/all.html>.

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