

# Eastern Hophornbeam

*Ostrya virginiana*

**Common name:**

Ironwood, American Hophornbeam, Leverwood, Hardhack

**Pronunciation:**

OS-tri-a ver-jin-e-A-na

**Family:**

Betulaceae

**Genus:**

*Ostrya*

"In our rich sylvia a little tree like the Ironwood melts into the summer greenery, or the silver intricacy of naked twigs in the winter woods, in a way that makes it difficult to pick out and identify. Not that it lacks distinctive features -- it has two -- the hop-like scales on the nut that makes it look as though the fruit were enclosed in little paper bags, and the bark which somewhat resembles that of the Birches, except it is more scurfy than papery."

"The beauty of the Ironwood is subtle, with its dainty beechen leaves which turn a soft, dull gold in autumn...."

(excerpts from Donald Culross Peattie, *A Natural History of Trees of Eastern and Central North America*)

**Quick ID Tips**

- Common understory tree with bark in narrow strips that have loose ends and often slightly twisted on the trunk
- Narrow, double-toothed leaves with slender tip and forked veins at leaf edges
- Upper leaf surface slightly rough and not glossy; lower surface green with pale veins
- Male brown catkins persist; hanging cluster of papery, pointed bladders

**Details**

- Deciduous tree, 25-40 ft (8-12 m) tall, horizontal or drooping branches, rounded outline, pyramidal in youth.
- Bark grayish brown in long, narrow strips that are loose at the end, giving the trunk a slightly shaggy appearance. The strips are often slightly twisted on the trunk.

- Leaves simple, alternate, oval-lanceolate, 2-4" long, half as wide as long, acuminate, rounded or heart-shaped, sharply and doubly serrate, dark green above, paler and fuzzy below. Veins are forked at the leaf edges.
- Male flowers in catkins are grouped in threes, often visible into the winter; female flowers visible in spring, in elongated clusters, about 1" long, at the tips of new leafy shoots.
- Fruit is a flattened nutlet about 1/4" long, each enclosed in a pale yellowish inflated sac that resembles the flower cluster of hops, hence the common name Hophornbeam. A sac cluster is about 4-5". The tiny seeds, buds, and dried catkins are eaten by ruffed grouse, bobwhite, deer, pheasant, and rabbit.
- Winter buds are light, chestnut brown, and stout.
- Prefers sun but is well adapted to partial shade, best in cool, moist, well-drained, slightly acid soil.
- Hardy in USDA Zones 3-9. Native from Maine and Ontario to Minnesota, south to Florida and Texas.
- The wood is the second hardest after Dogwood in our northern woods, harder than oak, ash, hickory, locust, or persimmon (*Peattie*). Wood is very heavy and used for handles of axes and mallets or a lever when great strength is needed.



leaves



developing fruit clusters



leaf and dry fruit clusters



fall leaves and dried fruit clusters



male catkins hanging in spring



bark on trunk



winter twig, buds

Sources:

- Oregon State University Landscape Plants, <https://landscapeplants.oregonstate.edu/plants/ostrya-virginiana>
- David Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Trees* (Knopf 2009)