

# Paper Birch

## *Betula papyrifera*

**Common name:**

Paper Birch, Paperbark Birch. Canoe Birch, White Birch, Silver Birch

**Pronunciation:**

BET-u-la pap-i-RIF-er-a

**Family:** Betulaceae

**Genus:** *Betula*

"Wherever it grows the Paper Birch delights in the company of Conifers and in the presence of water; it loves a white and rushing stream; it loves a cold clear lake where its white limbs are reflected. Sometimes it is found in swamps and boggy meadows, and if it must leave the neighborhood of moisture, it likes deep, rocky woods with cool soil."

"To any American of an older generation (now, alas, even canoes are being made of aluminum) there was no more there was no more blissful experience than the moment when on his first visit to the North Woods he stepped into a Birch bark canoe weighing perhaps no more than 50 pounds but strong enough to carry twenty times as much. At the first stroke of the paddle, it shot out over the lake water like a bird, so that one drew a breath of the purest ozone of happiness, for on all the waters of the world there floats no sweeter craft than this. The Indians taught our race how to strip the bark from the Birch and sew it with long slender roots of Tamarack for thread. The bark was then stretched and tied over the frame -- commonly made of northern White Cedar or Arborvitae -- while the holes in the bark and the partings at the seams were caulked with resin of Pine or Balsam or Balm of Gilead."

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

**Quick ID Tips**

- Chalky white bark easily peels into strips, and the bark has some dark triangular patches (chevrons)
- Double-toothed leaf that is oval or wedge-shaped and 5-9 veins branch off the midrib

- Male catkins (often in threes) are at the ends of twigs and can persist throughout the fall and winter after the leaves are gone.

## Details

- This deciduous tree grows 40-70 ft. and is the most widespread and familiar birch in North America. Its shape is loosely pyramidal to rounded, and it takes several years before lateral branches show chalky-white paper-like bark.
- The peeling white bark on mature trees is the most well-known and obvious identification feature. In younger trees, the bark is reddish brown for the first 10 years. The inner bark is cream-colored, pink, or orange.
- Due to its resinous, waterproof characteristics, the bark was used to make birchbark canoes, with the inner bark facing outward to touch the water. The sap was used to make sweet syrup and the wood used for snowshoe frames.
- NOTE: Never peel the bark from a living birch, since the white layer won't be replaced, and the trunk will bear the dark scars for the rest of the tree's life. Because the bark is waterproof and does not easily rot, look for downed trees from which strips of the bark can be obtained.
- The bark shows dark, triangular chevrons where branches have fallen off. The paper birch has fewer bark chevrons on the trunk when compared with the similar gray birch.
- Leaves are 3-5" long, simple, alternate, and oval or sometimes wedge shaped. Leaf margins are coarsely double-toothed, and 5-9 veins branch off on each side of the midrib. The leaves are dull green and fuzzy (glabrous) above and paler green below and turn yellow in fall.
- The flowers are formed on catkins in April or May before the leaves emerge. Multiple male catkins are found at twig tips and droop downward while the female catkins are short and upright.
- The seeds are fed upon by chickadees, redpolls, pine siskins, and fox sparrows. Ruffed grouse, white-tailed deer, moose, snowshoe hare, cottontail rabbits, beavers, and porcupine feed on the twigs and buds.
- This is a northern species and does best in areas where the average summer temperatures stay below 70°F. Its native range extends from Labrador to British Columbia, Washington (and into the Wallowa Mountains of northeastern Oregon), south to Pennsylvania, Michigan, Nebraska, and Montana.
- Hardy in USDA Zones 2-6. This tree prefers sun and is adapted to a variety of soils but does best in well-drained, acid, moist, sandy or silty loams. This birch, along with the other native northern birches, is susceptible to the

bronze birch borer and the birch leaf miner, which weaken or kill the birch tree.

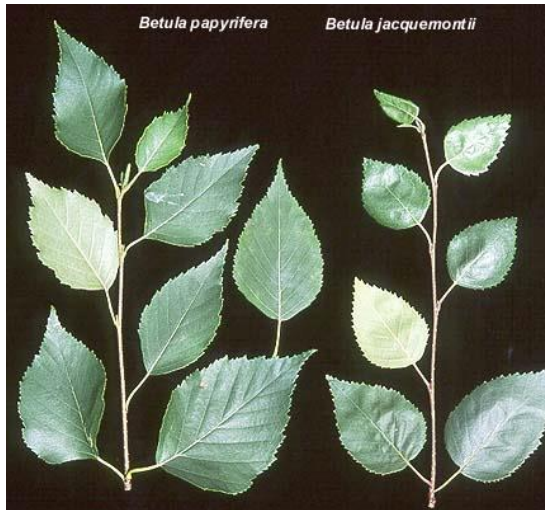
- *papyrifera*: paper-bearing



bark with dark chevrons



peeling bark



leaves



leaf margin





young bark



fall color



male catkins



catkins in late summer



winter catkins and winter buds

Sources:

- Oregon State University Landscape Plants,  
<https://landscapeplants.oregonstate.edu/plants/betula-papyrifera>
- Charles Fergus, *Trees of New England, A Natural History* (Globe Pequot Press 2005)
- David Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Trees* (Knopf 2009)