

Pignut Hickory

Carya glabra

Common Name:

Pignut Hickory, Smoothbark Hickory, Broom Hickory, Red Hickory, Brown Hickory, Swamp Hickory

Pronunciation:

KAR-yah GLA-brah

Family:

Juglandaceae

Genus:

Carya

"To turn from ... the native Walnut, prince of the cabinet woods, to the incomparably tough, heavy, shock-resistant Hickory, is like turning from a polished nobleman to a sinewy, hard-bitten backwoodsman. And of all the hickories, the broom [pignut] is on the whole the most rugged of a hardy breed. Its wood is the heaviest in our range equaled only by the Shagbark Hickory.... Tough yet flexible and resistant to an impact load, it is in the highest demand for axe handles and every sort of striking tool."

"... Hickory fights back toward survival in its own stubborn way. Like backwoods children flourishing, the seedlings can come up through dense shade. So Hickory is a "pushing" species, able to succeed other hardwoods in the ecological course of events, even to succeed itself generation after generation on the same land. More, it will endure poorer soils and drier situations than many of our hardwoods. And when released from intense forest competition, it can put on comparatively fast growth where, before, it had been the slowest of all."

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

Quick ID Tips

- Sharp incurved teeth on compound pinnate leaf with 5 leaflets
- Nut husk splits only partway to base
- Pear-shaped nut has a sweet maple-like smell
- Tight gray bark has interlacing ridges in an irregular diamond-shaped pattern

Details

- The pignut hickory is a common but not abundant species in the oak-hickory climax forest of the eastern United States.

- The tree grows to 50-60 ft, is slow growing but long-lived up to 200 years, and bears fruit after 30 years or so.
- Bark is dark gray, with shallow fissures and tight, narrow ridges, hard and tough and about 2/3 inch thick. The bark typically does not peel off from the trunk.
- Leaves are alternate, pinnately compound, 9" long, thick to the touch, with 5 (rarely 7) toothed lanceolate leaflets. Upper surface is hairless; bottom surface is paler and often has tufts of pale hairs in the axils of the veins on the leaflets.
- Twigs are reddish-brown, slender, hairless, and are marked with pale oblong lenticels. Buds are small, oval, and light brown.
- Fruit is a pear-shaped husk 1" long and 3/4" wide, tapering to stalk-like base and eventually splits only partway to the base. Catkins appear before the leaves.
- The fruit ripens in September-October and is an important part of the diet of many wild animals, including squirrels, turkey, black bear, white-tailed deer, foxes, rabbits, chipmunk, and raccoons. The nuts are extremely nutritious with high levels of crude fat, but the nut rarely remains viable on the forest floor for more than one winter. In early days, farmers were known to have their pigs feed on the nuts, hence the name "pignut."
- More than 100 insect species have been reported to infest hickory trees but only a few seriously damage or kill the tree.
- Fall color is a bright deepyellow, sometimes referred to as candle flame yellow.
- Hardy in USDA Zones 4-9. The extensive range of this tree includes nearly all of the eastern United States and parts of Canada, and extends from Massachusetts to Illinois and south to Florida to Louisiana.
- The Pignut Hickory prefers humid sunny areas but can manage to grow in partial shade. It frequently grows on dry ridgetops and side slopes but is also common in mountainous moist soils.



leaves



fall color



winter bud



spring bud break



female flower



ripening nut



ripe nut



trunk bark

Sources:

- Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carya_glabra
- Charles Fergus, *Trees of New England, A Natural History* (Globe Pequot Press 2005)
- David Sibley, *The Sibley Guide to Trees* (Knopf 2009)