

Sweet (Black) Birch

Betula lenta

Common name:

Sweet Birch, Black Birch, Mahogany Birch, Cherry Birch

Pronunciation:

BET-u-la LEN-ta

Family:

Betulaceae

Genus:

Betula

"Two characteristics in combination easily identify this lovely tree. The first is the strong wintergreen aroma of the bark and the leaves (a trait which it shares with the slightly aromatic Yellow Birch) and the second is the close, lustrous, mahogany-red bark, a characteristic not in the least shared with any other Birch, but stead with the wild Black Cherry -- whence the name of Cherry Birch."

"This tree has been a source of the commercial extract known as oil of wintergreen. In taste and odor and chemical composition it is identical with the original wintergreen obtained from the dainty little plant of that name, a member of the same family as trailing arbutus, which creeps through the woods in our northern states. The quantity that could be produced from the tree, however, was found to be so much greater that country folk no longer bothered with the true wintergreen.... The country folk sold the oil by the quart to the storekeepers, who passed it on to the wholesale druggists, and these in turn refined it and used it to flavor drugs, medicines, and candy."

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

Quick ID Tips:

- Strong wintergreen odor and sweet taste when twigs are scratched
- Finely double-toothed leaf margins
- Light red-brown bark on younger trees with dark horizontal lenticels
- In older trees, almost black bark peels away in broad plates from the trunk

Details:

- A medium to large broadleaf deciduous tree that is common to our northern hardwood forests. The Sweet or Black Birch grows to 60-75 ft. (23 m) and is similar in size and habit to the Yellow Birch.

- Bark is light, shiny reddish brown or gray in younger Sweet Birch and has dark, horizontal lenticels. In older trees, the bark turns almost black with the mature bark separating away from the trunk in large, broad plates.
- Leaves are simple, alternate, ovate to ovate-oblong, 4" long, finely double-toothed along the leaf margins, and with a sharply pointed tip. The upper surface is glossy dark green and paler green below and pubescent on veins. Nine to twelve veins branch away from the midrib.
- Fall leaf color is yellow gold.
- The twigs have a strong wintergreen odor or flavor when scratched and taste sweet. This distinguishes Sweet Birch from the Yellow Birch; the latter has a fainter wintergreen odor and tastes bitter.
- Fruiting and female catkins are barrel-shaped, erect, shaggy, stalkless, and significantly shorter (<1") than the male catkins. Male catkins are slender, yellow, conspicuous, 2-4" long, pendulous, usually in 4's, and appear before the leaves.
- Prefers sun but tolerates shade. Grows best in moist well-drained soil but tolerates drier soils than most birches. Reportedly somewhat resistant to the bronze birch borer and the birch leaf miner.
- Hardy in USDA Zones 3-7. Native range extends from Maine to southern Ontario, south to Ohio and Alabama (generally mountain habitat in the south).
- Names: Sweet Birch apparently comes from the wintergreen odor and sweet taste while Cherry Birch comes from the young trees with cherry-like bark, i.e., dark reddish brown with prominent horizontal lenticels similar to the bark of the wild Black Cherry.
- *lenta*: tough but pliant



plant habit



leaf



male catkins



male catkins



female catkins



young bark



mature bark



older trunk bark

Sources:

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