

Yellow Birch

Betula alleghaniensis

Common name:

Yellow Birch, Golden Birch, Hard Birch, Swamp Birch, Silver Birch

Pronunciation:

BET-u-la al-le-GHE-ni-en-sis

Family:

Betulaceae

Genus:

Betula

"In the North Woods, the Yellow Birch inhabits the upland; southward, in the Middle Atlantic states, it finds the cool habitat that it prefers in swampy ground.... [W]herever it occurs, and tall as it may grow, it somehow manages to melt inconspicuously into the great forest mass; it does not shine forth like its relative the Paper Birch, save in autumn when it shows its rich, clear golden foliage"

"Yet so long unrecognized by science and never deemed worthy of cultivation, Yellow Birch is the hard working member of the Birch tribe, for it is by all means the most valuable timber tree in it. Most Birch furniture is made of this species; the nearly white sapwood is customarily deepened into a pale gold by stains and varnishes, and beautiful roll and other fancy figures develop in some specimens. Formerly, at least, Yellow Birch was much sought by shipbuilders of Nova Scotia and Maine for the parts of vessels continually underwater. It was used in the Maine lumber camps for ox yokes -- because it was both light and strong -- for the frames of the sledges that traveled over the snows, and in the forms of logs left with the bark still on them for the walls of the old buck bunkhouses. Because it grips with unrelaxing strength, Yellow Birch was a favorite for hubs; the spokes can never work loose and no normal strain can crack them."

"Frequently when a Yellow Birch comes to the end of its life span, it stands a long time though decay is going on swiftly under the bark. Such a tree is then nothing but a skin of stuff with punkwood. Even this had its use, to the Indians; they collected and dried it, and carried it with them as tinder in which to start a fire by friction."

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

Quick ID Tips:

- Yellowish, bronze, or silvery bark peeling in shreds or rolls (curls)
- Elongated, oval, finely double-toothed 4" leaves with short stalks, pointed tips, and indented base

- Crushed twigs have a faint wintergreen smell (much weaker than Sweet Birch)
- Male catkins are in bunches of 3-6 at the end of twigs

Details:

- This broadleaf deciduous birch is the tallest of our native birches, typically 60-80 ft. but can reach 100 ft. Branches spread wide and have drooping tips.
- Bark is thin reddish-brown when young and becomes yellowish bronze with thin papery shreds, rolls, or curls peeling off the trunk. However, the bark is not easily peeled and, with age, separates into ragged-edged plates.
- Leaves are simple, alternate, ovate to oblong-ovate, 4-5" long, with sharp-pointed tips, a rounded or indented base. The leaf margin is finely double-toothed like all the birches; each leaf has 9-11 pairs of veins and each vein ends in a tooth. The leaves are deep yellowish green above, lighter below.
- Twigs are light orange-brown and covered with long hairs that gradually are worn away over the year. When scratched or crushed, the twigs have a faint odor of wintergreen.
- Flowers appear in April before the leaves. Male (pollen) catkins are stiff, 3-4" long, and are in groups of 3-6 at the end of twigs. Further back on the same twigs, the female cones (seed cone) are less than 1" long, stand erect on spur shoots, and ripen in early fall.
- Tiny seeds are released from the egg-shaped cones throughout the winter. Seeds can germinate in bare soil and even on mosses on a rock. In that instance, roots are sent into the ground around the rock, and the mature tree looks like it has large, gnarled fingers clasping the rock or that the Yellow Birch is standing on stilts.
- Prefers full sun but is somewhat shade tolerant. Commonly found in rich, moist, well-drained soils and generally grows in wetter habitats than the Paper Birch.
- Hardy in USDA Zones 3-7. The Yellow Birch is a northerly and eastern birch, and is native from Newfoundland to Manitoba, south to the highest peaks of Tennessee and Georgia.
- Today, Yellow Birch is a commercially important hardwood. It is used for flooring, furniture, veneer, rustic chairs, snowshoes, toboggans, clothespins, brush backs, kitchen utensils, knife handles, brooms, popsicle sticks, and toothpicks. The curls of bark are a good source of tinder for fire making.
- The twigs are browsed on by whitetail deer, moose, and rabbits. Deer eat many saplings and may limit regeneration of the species if the deer population is too great. Ruffed grouse and various songbirds feed on the seeds and buds. Due to the thin bark of the tree, yellow-bellied sapsuckers feed on this tree by drilling

holes in the tree and collecting the sap. Broad-winged hawks show a preference for nesting in yellow birch in some areas.



plant habit, spring



leaves



male catkins



immature cones



mature cones, fall



fall color



winter twigs



trunk, young and old bark

Sources:

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