

Maine Tree Species Fact Sheet

Common Names: Yellow Birch (Silver Birch, Gray Birch)

Botanical name: *Betula alleghaniensis*

Tree Type: Deciduous



<http://www.dcnr.state.pa.us/forestry/commontr/images/YellowBirch.gif>

Physical Description:

Growth Habit: Yellow birch is a medium to large tree that grows well in rich, moist conditions, but prefers cool soils and cool summer temperatures. The bark on young branches is thin and has horizontal, peeling bark that is shiny, silvery gray or yellowish brown in color. With age, the bark becomes dull gray or black and peels into thin papery layers, which roll back and extend up the trunk in long lines of ragged fringe. The leaves of the yellow birch are alternate, hairy, somewhat oblong, and 3"- 4 1/2" long. The upper side of the leaf is a dull, dark green and the underside is a yellowish green with 9 or more un-branched side veins. The leaf edges are double-toothed like the blade of a saw. The leaves turn bright yellow in the fall.

Height: Yellow birch typically grows to a height of 60-75 feet, although it occasionally reaches 100 feet. It is the largest of the native birches in Maine, growing to a diameter of 2-3 feet.

Shape: The crown of the yellow birch is generally broad and round.

Fruit/Seed Description/Dispersal Methods:

Yellow birch is monoecious; male and female catkins are borne separately on the same branch. The female, fruiting catkins are ovoid in form and nearly upright (very short-stalked cone about 1" to 1 1/2" long). These "seed cones" are light brown and hairy. They mature in July and remain on the tree for several months. The male, pollen catkins form in the fall, remain on the tree all winter, and lengthen and mature in the spring.

Range within Maine:

Yellow birch is often found growing on north facing slopes, in woods with beech, sugar maple or hemlock, and in swamps. This species is hardy to Zone 3.

Distinguishing Features:

Both the buds and twigs smell and taste like wintergreen. The silvery gray to yellowish bark, peels in thin sheets and the undersurface of leaves are hairy along the veins.

Relationship to Wildlife:

Ruffed and sharp-tailed grouse, prairie chicken, yellow-bellied sapsucker, various songbirds, white-tailed deer, moose, cottontail rabbit, porcupine, and red squirrels use this tree for food.

Interesting Facts:

Of the nine species of birch native to North America, the yellow birch is the most common and the most important for commercial lumber. The wood of the yellow birch is used for furniture, cabinetry, flooring, doors and paneling. When milled, it has a dense, smooth surface texture and therefore holds paints and stains well, and polishes beautifully. Being a hardwood, birch is often used to make spools for thread, dowels, handles and toys.

Yellow birch sap may be harvested in early spring, before the leaves unfurl, by tapping the trunk. It has a sweet flavor, but the sugar content is much lower than maple sap. The sap flows abundantly and can be boiled down into syrup or fermented into a beer. The bark is the source of “Oil of Wintergreen” which is used as a medicinal flavoring.

Landscape Use:

The yellow birch is a beautiful ornamental tree and thrives under certain conditions. It prefers a well-drained loamy soil, but will take to heavy clay soils. It is shade tolerant and does best in a sheltered area. It is relatively fast growing and long-lived for a birch. The trees are highly susceptible to forest fires, and, even when wet, the bark is highly flammable. However, in a forest setting, it re-seeds burned areas quickly.

Common Problems or Pests of the Tree in Maine:

The yellow birch is a very sensitive species and is vulnerable to root, stem and crown injury. The fine branching habit makes it susceptible to damage from accumulating ice or snow loads and the foliage and twigs are injured by wind-borne salt. Yellow birch is affected by various diseases (including fungus, blight, canker and root rot) and many insects. The most serious pest is the bronze birch borer, which attacks both healthy and weakened birches. Other insects include the Columbian timber beetle, a flatheaded borer, and the ambrosia beetle.

References:

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