
Wildflower Spot – January 2018
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

BITTERNUT HICKORY

Carya cordiformis

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Bitternut Hickory is easily recognized among the hickories, with its bright yellow-powdery buds. Like those of pecan trees, the buds of Bitternut Hickory are naked, not covered by bud scales. What we are seeing is actually minute powdery-yellow leaves.

Leaves are compound, the small leaflets usually 7-11, and usually hairy underneath. In the fall the leaves are bright yellow, and are retained on the tree longer than other hickories. The flowers are wind-pollinated; in April the male flowers are long graceful catkins.



One of the largest hickories, growing 50-100 feet tall, the tree typically develops several primary ascending limbs, forming an arched shape. The bark is tight with a network of fine smooth ridges.

The four-winged, cylindrical nuts have a very thin, rough husk which splits only to the middle. They are so bitter that even squirrels usually avoid them.

Bitternut Hickory is common throughout eastern and central United States and Canada.

It is native to the eastern coastal counties of Virginia, and most counties in the state. The tree grows in a variety of habitats, from rich, moist lowlands to drier uplands, and is seldom cultivated.

Favored for smoking ham, bacon and other meats, Bitternut Hickory imparts a distinctive flavor. The tree furnishes food for the larvae of giant moths -- the luna, and the regal moth, whose fearsome caterpillar is known as the Hickory Horned Devil. ❖

Photo: Photo: Bitternut Hickory twig (*Carya cordiformis*) taken by Phillip Merritt
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