

River Birch, Graceful and Vigorous Native

By Susan Camp

At last Wednesday's Winter Library Series presentation about tree identification, I started thinking about tree pruning season, which is close upon us, and one of my favorite times of year. There is something refreshing and invigorating about getting outside to remove and dispose of dead wood. It is a way of starting over, of getting rid of winter damage, and letting the trees and shrubs show a fresh, new face for spring. It also is great exercise.

Most of us prune trees in late winter or very early spring when the trees are still dormant. It is easier to see dead, damaged, and diseased branches and to visualize the shape you want to achieve, if you prune before the trees leaf out.

Maples, walnuts, and birches "bleed" sap when they are pruned in the spring. The sap loss is not harmful to the tree, and will stop once leaves appear, but several sources recommend summer pruning for "bleeders." The graceful river birch is one tree that should be pruned in summer to prevent sap loss.

River birch (*Betula nigra*) is native to the southeastern United States, but is found from New Hampshire to Florida and west from southern Minnesota to Texas in USDA Hardiness Zones 3 to 9. It is the most heat tolerant of the birch species.

A medium to rapidly growing tree, river birch reaches a height of 40 to 70 feet with a spread of similar size. Many growers cultivate river birch as a multi-trunked tree, as it develops a more attractive, rounded shape than does a single-trunked specimen.

River birch is considered a semi-aquatic tree that thrives in moist, low-lying areas with poor drainage. It requires full sun to full shade in average, moist to wet, acidic soils with a pH below 6.5. River birch will suffer from iron chlorosis, leading to yellowing of leaf tissue around the veins, if the soil is too alkaline. It will tolerate deer, high summer temperatures, moderate flooding, and some drought. Continuous lack of sufficient water can shorten its lifespan. Avoid planting river birch close to the house, as its roots will grow toward the foundation.

The immature river birch's most attractive feature is its papery, pinkish-brown bark, which peels back to reveal cinnamon-brown bark beneath. As the tree ages, the bark ceases exfoliating and becomes dark gray or black with a scaly appearance.

The diamond-shaped leaves are a glossy green with double-toothed margins. Fall color is light yellow. River birch is monoecious, meaning both male and female flowers appear on the same tree. Male catkins are brownish in color; female catkins are erect, pale green cones. The catkins appear in April or May. Female catkins will drop and are carried on the wind.

River birch continues to grow in popularity because of its attractive appearance and its heat, water, and drought tolerance. It is an attractive landscape tree when planted on its own, but also works well in groupings in large, open areas.

River birch is not susceptible to many diseases or insect pests. Fungal leaf spot can cause leaf drop during warm, rainy summers. Leaf miners and aphids may cause minor damage. Fall webworms can be controlled with *Bacillus thuringiensis* (Bt). The bronze birch borer, which causes major, or even fatal, damage to white-barked paper birch (*B. papyrifera*) and European white birch (*B. pendula*), does not attack river birch.

See Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication HORT-23 “River Birch, *Betula nigra*”; Clemson Cooperative Extension HGIC 1005 “River Birch”; Arbor Day Foundation entry “River Birch: *Betula nigra*”; and the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entry “*Betula nigra*” for more detailed information.

If you are interested in learning how to prune trees correctly and how to sharpen and maintain your pruning tools, the Gloucester and Mathews/Middlesex Master Gardeners and Tree Stewards will co-host a Tree Forum on Saturday, February 24th from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at Brent and Becky’s Bulbs. Call (804) 694-8178 or (804) 684-5457 for more information.

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