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Trees of Ontario: the Ashes

Ash is the least conspicuous of our major forest tree species. It doesn't have showy leaves, the marvellously intricate pattern of its bark is hidden by its dark color, and its tiny brown-black buds almost beg to remain anonymous.

But do not be put off by the unassuming appearance of this tree. Each part of the ash is exquisitely wrought: taken together, they constitute one of nature's most remarkable achievements in tree architecture.

The trunk of the ash is straight, clean and simple, unmarred by old knots or branches. Ridges of bark, almost black, form a diamond pattern around the trunk of a mature tree. The bark is rough and broken because it bursts rather than stretches as the trunk expands. The buds, like tiny black peas, grow in pairs along the twigs, and are especially prominent at the tips.

Ash leaves are multiple, and contain 5-11 leaflets, generally of the same size. These leaflets are so large that they appear to be leaves in their own right.

Ash is noted for the high quality of its wood. Tough, straight-grained, hard but elastic, it makes the best tennis rackets, canoe paddles, bows and arrows, and tool handles.

Four ashes are native to Ontario, although one of these, blue ash, is confined to the south.

Black ash (*Fraxinus nigra* Marsh.) has the widest distribution in the province. A tree of the woodland swamps, it has a very slender trunk which extends almost to the top of its crown.

Although it is not as strong as its sister species, black ash possesses one quality not shared by the others. It can be split easily into very thin yet remarkably tough pieces. In the early days, the Indians beat the summerwood vigorously and separated it into long strips which they used for weaving fish baskets. Later, the pioneer white settlers used the same process to obtain wood strips for woven chair bottoms and barrel hoops.

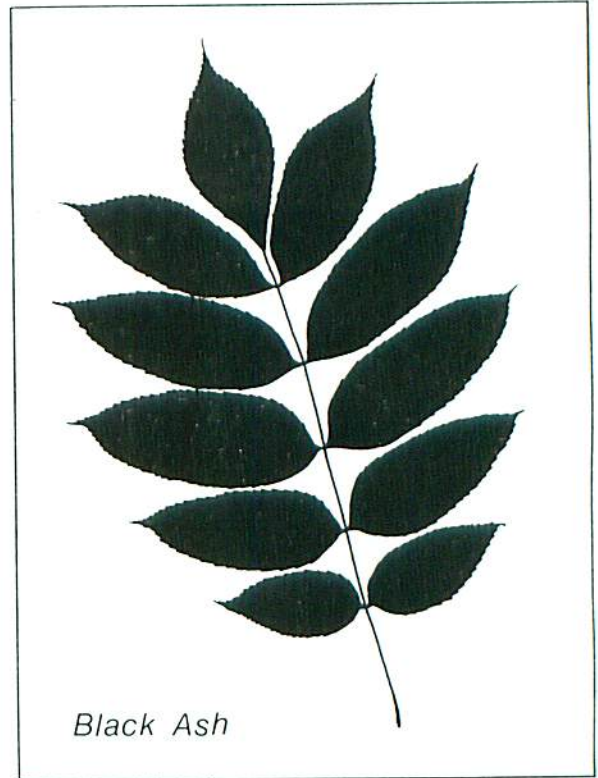


Fraxinus nigra Marsh.

Trees growing in supersaturated and oxygen-deficient conditions tend to develop large burls. Veneers of black ash burl are highly prized by cabinet makers.

White ash (*Fraxinus americana* L.), though primarily a tree of southern Ontario, includes southern Algoma in its range. It makes its best growth in deep, moist, well-drained soils, where it averages 18-21 m at maturity. Usually there are 7 leaflets in the white ash leaf. These are dark green on the upper surface and very pale beneath, turning purple or yellow in autumn.

Most young boys are familiar with white ash wood, for it makes the very best baseball bats. Its lovely yellowish white sapwood marked with the pale brown rings of its annual growth, its great strength yet comparative lightness, the satisfying "plonk" it emits when struck, make it a favorite of the little league set. Another plus for white ash: the juice of its leaves is reported to offer some relief from the itching and swelling caused by mosquito bites.



Red ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica* Marsh.) is aptly named. Its buds are covered with a dense, red-brown velvety down; its twigs and the undersurface of its leaves have red hairs; even the inner bark of the young branches is red.

Although it has quite a wide range in Canada, red ash is not nearly as abundant as white ash. It favors stream banks and low ground as its habitat, and generally doesn't grow too tall.

The wood is heavy and coarser grained than that of white and black ash, although it is usually sold as white ash and is used for the same purposes.

Blue ash (*Fraxinus quadrangulata* Michx.), found only in southwestern Ontario in the Point Pelee and Thames River Valley areas, is a medium-sized tree with unusually scaly bark. Because it is scarce, blue ash is of little commercial importance.

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Copies of this leaflet can be obtained from the Centre's Information Office.

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