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Trees of Ontario: the Birches

Every child who grows up in Ontario knows the fascination of peeling the thin, almost transparent bark of the white birch tree, and of writing secret messages on its smooth, paperlike surface. Wherever it grows, white birch is a striking feature of the landscape; its beauty has long been celebrated by our artists and poets.

White birch (*Betula papyrifera* Marsh.) is generally found in company with conifers, near lakes or streams, or in deep, rocky woods with cool soil. Fortunately, it is light-tolerant in youth, and therefore grows readily on burned-over and cutover land. Consequently, it has replaced white pine and the spruces in many areas.

The Indians and early settlers in Canada used the bark of white birch to construct the graceful yet sturdy canoes that were such a prominent feature of the lakes and rivers of the north woods. Sometimes the Indians used the bark to cover their tepees and lodges, or to kindle their fires.

The inner bark of white birch is a favorite of the beaver, second only to aspen. Deer and moose browse the twigs in winter, and grouse eat the buds. Although the wood of white birch was not used to any extent by the early settlers it is now valued for pulpwood and veneer.

White birch is a medium-sized tree, generally reaching a height of about 24 metres at maturity. Its leaves are triangular or egg-shaped, about 2 centimetres long, without teeth near the leaf stock. The wood is moderately heavy, hard and strong.

Because white birch is such an attractive tree, many people grow it as an ornamental, so you'll find it on residential streets of most Ontario cities and towns.

Yellow birch (*Betula alleghaniensis* Britt.), the hard working member of the birch family, is one of our most valuable timber species. The wood is heavy, hard, strong and fine-grained, and is used extensively for furniture, cabinet work, interior trim in houses, flooring, doors, veneer and plywood.

Frequently, when yellow birch comes to the end of its lifespan, it remains standing for a long time, although decay is going on swiftly under the bark. When this happens,



Betula papyrifera

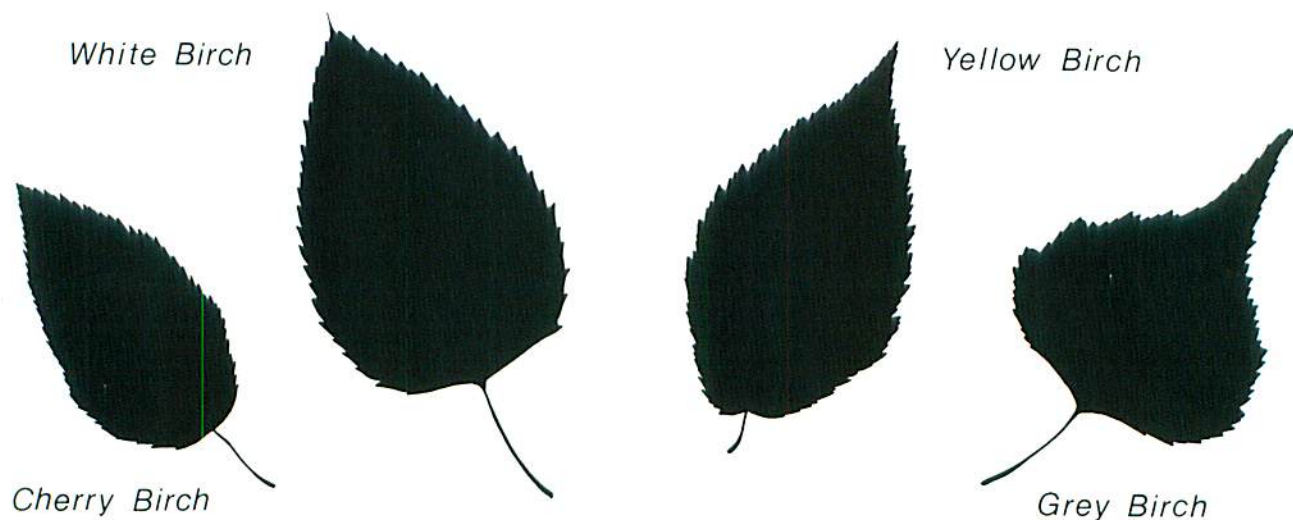
the tree is merely a skin enclosing a spongy mass of "punkwood". But even punkwood had its use among the early Indian inhabitants of Ontario: they dried it and carried it with them as tinder for starting a fire by friction.

The largest of the native birches, yellow birch normally attains heights of 18-22 metres, and occasionally reaches 30 metres. Its leaves are oval, tapering gradually from the middle to a slender, sharp point at the top and a narrow, heart-shaped base which is toothed all around the margin. The bark is thin, dark red and shiny on young trees. It gradually turns yellow-grey and produces papery shreds which, unlike the bark of white birch, do not peel easily. In maturity the bark breaks into large, ragged-edged plates.

Both yellow and white birch produce great quantities of seeds which are borne on wings for miles by the autumn winds. Wherever they alight, in an abandoned field, a logged-over tract, or a deep, moss-floored forest, they are content with conditions and germinate almost immediately.

Grey birch (*Betula populifolia* Marsh.) is as yet confined to the southeastern portion of the province, but it is extending its range northward and westward. Like white birch it regenerates quickly after cutting or fire, but it is a short-lived tree, and is soon replaced by other species. Rarely exceeding 10 metres in height, it is not a commercially important species, and is used chiefly for fuel.

Recently a small grove of cherry birch (*Betula lenta* L.) was found west of Port Dalhousie. This is the only place in the country where the species is known to occur naturally. It is a medium-sized tree, reaching 12-15 metres at maturity, with heavy, hard, strong-grained wood. Although it has the same properties as yellow birch, it is too rare to be of commercial importance.



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

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