

December 2017 Plant of the Month



Betula alleghaniensis Britton, Yellow Birch

December's selection for our *Plant of the Month* reflects the changing of the seasons, and the approaching winter. As with all deciduous trees, our Plant of the Month, Yellow Birch, will now be identifiable by its bark, twigs, and buds. The genus *Betula* is best represented in New Jersey's forests of the Piedmont, Highlands and Valley and Ridge provinces. All of New Jersey's birches have representations in the Northern New Jersey Counties. Hough (1983) maps yellow birch range as frequent north of the Fall Line, yet multiple discoveries in Burlington County further expand the distribution to sporadic populations on the Inner and Outer Coastal Plains.

Yellow Birch prefers rich loam soils, with a moisture preference favoring the wetter end of the gradient. Fernald (1950) describes the habitat preference as rich woods; Hough (1983) broadens this to well-drained, cool, rich, moist soil of woods. My personal experience is as an opportunistic succession tree that remains in mature forest canopies on loamy soils at or near saturation, in association with rich forests that include American beech, black cherry, sugar maple, witch hazel, and mountain laurel. At its southern limits, it associates with red maple and sweet gum as well.

Betula alleghaniensis is a deciduous species, and the tree sheds its leaves early each fall. The fall canopy color of a yellow birch is brilliant yellow. Once the leaves have dropped, the identifying characters are visible on the bark and twig. Yellow birch is one of the birch species that exfoliates the outer layers of bark. Yellow birch bark sheds as thin layers. They exfoliate as thin flexible ribbons following circular pattern around the trunk. River birch also sheds, yet its bark exfoliates large tan plates that are papery in look and texture. The long stalked buds with imbricate scales ending in point is also a character of this species.

The tree has many uses. Its dense, heavy lumber is prized for furniture and woodworking. The tree's sap is a source for the oil of wintergreen, the flavor once used in birch beer. Mary Hough (1983) also identifies yellow birch as the source of a brilliant yellow natural dye as well as a dye mordant to fix another similar color. Native Americans from all regions had many uses for the yellow birch. Their uses ranged from medicines, food, fiber for building and canoes, and as funeral offerings. Its bark was a favorite for storage containers and other culinary utensils.

Yellow birch is one of New Jersey's native forest trees, and it is visible year round. As the end of the 2017 growing season comes to a close, our enjoyment of the wonders of the State's diverse flora can be continued in the fall and winter just by knowing a few birch identifying characters.