

Betula nigra - River Birch (*Betulaceae*)

Betula nigra is a large, rapidly growing, Eastern U.S. native. River Birch is a fine-textured shade tree for dry or wet sites and is commonly produced in a multi-trunked form. It has a very attractive peach-colored exfoliating bark and is one of the best and most rapidly growing trees for both shade and ornamental bark.

Form



FEATURES

- large deciduous tree
- maturing at 60' tall x 40' wide
- upright oval growth habit for the species (but often sold in clump form of 3-5 trunks)
- rapid growth rate

Culture

- full sun to partial sun
- prefers moist, slightly acid soils (alkaline soils sometimes result in leaf chlorosis due to iron deficiency) but performs well in either wet or dry soils
- propagated primarily by rooted stem cuttings, but also by seed
- highly resistant to bronze birch borer (a potentially devastating pest of the popular white-barked birches) but susceptible to leaf miners and aphids, especially when under stress
- abundant availability in B&B form
- avoid pruning in spring unless sap bleeding from wounds will be tolerated

Foliage

- alternate, ovate (broadly triangular), doubly serrated and slightly incised
- medium to dark green upper sides and silvery-colored undersides
- autumn color - yellowish green in poor years, but golden-yellow to yellow-brown in good years



Flowers

- male catkins to 3" long in Apr.; female flowers inconspicuous

Fruits

- resemble immature catkins, opening and shedding seeds in spring

Twigs

- red-brown, somewhat shiny, with cinnamon-colored, heavily-lenticled branches exfoliating (peeling) to a brown-gray-light orange mixture on the species form

Trunk

- very scaly to platy
- gray-brown to almost black on the native species form, with selected species forms having peach-purple-colored exfoliating (peeling) bark

USAGE

Function

- specimen, focal point, or shade tree (casts a light to medium shade)

Texture

- fine texture in foliage and when bare
- open to average density in foliage but thick density when bare

Assets

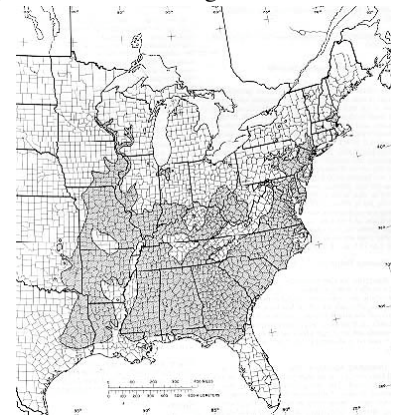
- not subject to bronze birch borer problems as are most birches
- rapid growth rate
- wet or dry site tolerant and heat tolerant
- exfoliating flaky bark
- shimmering bicolor summer foliage
- yellow autumn color in good years
- single trunk or clump forms
- dappled shade
- symmetrical branching

Liabilities

- alkaline soils sometimes yield chlorotic foliage
- a few surface roots with age
- overuse in the urban landscape may be associated with increasing problems such as attack by aphids and leaf miners

Habitat

- Zones 4 to 9
- Native to Eastern and Midwestern U.S.



SELECTIONS

Alternates

- trees with distinct ornamental bark, or rapidly growing shade trees

Cultivars - Variants - Related species



- Betula nigra* (PP4409) Heritage® ('Cully') - the popular cultivar of choice, with branches heavily exfoliating in the 2-6" diameter range to yield a cream-salmon-orange-gray combination of bark colors; an excellent Midwestern and Southern U.S. substitute for Paper Birch

- Paper Birch (*Betula papyrifera*) and other white-barked birches that often succumb to the bronze birch borer unless annual preventive spray programs are implemented
- Betula nigra* Fox Valley® ('Little King') - a dwarf selection; a low-branched, intermediate tree; good tree for small landscapes or a good shrub for commercial sites (limited availability, e.g. Spring Meadow Nursery)
- Betula nigra* Tecumseh Compact™ - a Stuebaker Nursery introduction; more compact form of *B. nigra* with a graceful pendulous branching habit (limited availability).