33. RIVER BIRCH

*Betula nigra* L.; red birch.

Medium-sized to large tree 60 ft (18 m) high with straight trunk 1½ ft (0.5 m) in diameter, often leaning over water, and with irregular spreading crown. Twigs slender, slightly zigzag, red brown, hairy when young. Buds short-pointed, hairy when young, becoming shiny brown, with 2-3 scales; end bud usually shedding.

Leaves mostly in 2 rows, ovate or nearly 4-sided, 1½-3 in (4-7.5 cm) long, 1-2¾ in (2.5-6 cm) wide, short-pointed at both ends, coarsely doubly saw-toothed or slightly lobed, mostly with 7-9 straight veins on each side, shiny dark green above, whitish green and usually hairy beneath, turning dull yellow in autumn.

Male flower clusters (catkins) few, drooping, narrowly cylindrical, 2-3 in (5-7.5 cm) long, with many tiny male flowers in early spring before leaves. Female flower clusters (catkins) conelike, elliptical, ¾ in (1 cm) long, greenish.

Fruits short-stalked upright cones 1-1½ in (2.5-4 cm) long, cylindrical, with many hairy 2-winged nutlets, maturing in spring or early summer.

Bark shiny pinkish brown or silvery gray, separating into persistent papery scales, becoming thick, fissured, and shaggy.

Wood light to dark or reddish brown with whitish or pale yellow sapwood, diffuse porous, fine-textured, moderately heavy (sp. gr. .55), moderately hard. Of limited supply and not used locally. Elsewhere used for furniture, woodenware, and turnery.


The only birch at low altitudes in se. U.S. and the southernmost New World birch. Principal uses are erosion control and as an ornamental for the showy papery bark.