

Birches

Birches occur throughout forests in the colder areas of Europe, Asia and North America. They are renowned among gardeners for their fast growth, ornamental bark and autumn colours.

The silver birch (*Betula pendula*) is especially popular as a garden plant.



bark of the silver birch



Birches also have many other uses, for example, the wood of the yellow birch [*Betula alleghaniensis*] from Eastern North America is heavy, strong, close-grained, even-textured, and shows a wide colour variation, from reddish brown to creamy white. It is used for furniture, cabinetry, charcoal, pulp, interior finish, veneer, tool handles, boxes and interior doors.

In their natural environment deer consume large numbers of yellow birch seedlings in summer, while the seeds are eaten by various bird species. Red squirrels cut and store mature catkins and eat the seeds. The sap of yellow birch can be tapped for use as an edible syrup, and tea can be made from the twigs and/or inner bark.

Among First Nations people in North America, bark containers were used to collect, store and cook food. Birch bark was readily available, waterproof, pliable, and rot resistant.

The most useful bark in North America comes from paper birch [*Betula papyrifera*], sometimes called white birch, or canoe birch. First Nations people used the bark to make baskets, storage containers, mats, baby carriers, moose and bird calls, torches, and, of course, canoes. The bark from the sweet or black birch [*Betula lenta*] is a source of wintergreen, and has also been used to make beer, and a herbal tea.



At our Arboretum the birch collection is a theme through each of the five Geographic Collections. The intersection of three collections around the north of Founders Lake has allowed us to display a number of birches in a relatively small area.

Betula lenta - sweet birch, or black birch, is the source of wintergreen – or something like it – opinions differ.

Betula nigra - river birch, red birch or (rarely) black birch: mainly ornamental, also used for furniture.



Freshly cut roll of birch bark



canoe made from birch bark



Betula nigra



Paper Birch
Betula papyrifera
US



White Birch
Betula pubescens
Europe



Himalayan Birch
Betula utilis
Asia

Birch [*Betula*]

The leaves and bark shown on the left are samples of birches from the US, Europe and Asia and show the similarity between them.

The map shows the distribution of birches. Their spread across the Northern Hemisphere evidences continental drift of the northern land mass plates.

