

038

Betula lenta

sweet birch

by Jim Flynn

SCIENTIFIC NAME

Betula lenta. Derivation: The genus name is classical Latin for birch. The specific epithet *lenta* means flexible or tough referring to the twigs.

FAMILY

Betulaceae, the birch family.

OTHER NAMES

black birch, cherry birch, red birch, mahogany birch.

DISTRIBUTION

The growth range extends from southern Maine, west to New York, New Jersey and eastern Ohio, south mostly in the mountain areas, including Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia and Kentucky to the western portions of North Carolina, the extreme northwest South Carolina, northern Georgia, Alabama and eastern Tennessee. In Canada, it is found in limited numbers in eastern Ontario and southwestern Quebec.

THE TREE

Sweet birch is a medium-sized tree attaining heights of 50 to 60 feet with diameters of 18 to 24 inches and a long clear bole. It grows best in the ancient forest loam and can almost always be found near mountain streams at the head of coves where its deep, smooth, mahogany-red bark stands out. The tree can also be found on rocky, boulder-strewn sites in spite of its need for nourishment. On poor soil, it is apt to be shrubby and have a stunted appearance. The numerous branches spread out from the stem at a wide angle. The twigs and smaller branches droop at the ends. The roots are deep and wide spreading. It seldom grows in pure stands and is found scattered amongst white pine, hemlock, yellow birch, black cherry, white ash, basswood and yellow poplar. Sweet birch is frequently confused with yellow birch (*B. alleghaniensis* WDS 037), but can be distinguished by its fine-toothed leaves with scalloped or heart-shaped bases and by the non-peeling blackish-red bark. The bark and twigs have a wintergreen taste.

THE TIMBER

Sweet birch has a light-colored sapwood, and the dark brown heartwood is often tinged with red. The wood has no distinct taste or odor. This diffuse-porous wood is strong with a very good shock-resisting ability. The texture is fine and uniform. Average reported specific gravity is 0.60 (ovendry weight/green volume), equivalent to an air-dried weight of 46 pcf.



SEASONING

It is hard to air dry because of its tendency to warp. Average reported shrinkage values (green to ovendry) are 6.5% radial, 9.0% tangential and 15.6% volumetric.

DURABILITY

Sweet birch is not durable when in contact with moist ground or when used in conditions where moisture is a problem.

WORKABILITY

Sweet birch has very good machining, gluing and finishing qualities. It turns well and, if splitting can be avoided, it has good nail holding capacity. Once dry, it is relatively stable and holds its shape well.

USES

One of the principal uses of this wood is veneer and plywood. Because it resembles maple, it is often used interchangeably in the furniture industry. It has many other uses including paneling, flooring, woodenware and butcher blocks. One of the old-time mountaineer uses was birch beer. The recipe in *A Natural History of Trees of the Eastern and Central North America* by Donald Culross Peattie is: "Tap the tree as the sugar maple is tapped, in spring when the sap is rising and the buds are just swelling, jug the sap and throw in a handful of shelled corn" and natural fermentation will finish the job.

SUPPLIES

In North America, the three birches of highest commercial importance are yellow birch, white birch (*B. papyrifera* WDS 039) and sweet birch. It is difficult to identify the specific species when confronted with the wood alone. White birch can be distinguished from the others on the basis of weight because it is much lighter. A lumber dealer may have between three and five different species combined in stacks labeled birch. It is essential when seeking a specific species of birch that it be identified before it is harvested. Supplies are plentiful.

