

Trees of Note along Your Way

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River Birch. *Betula nigra*.

Everyone knows those beautiful north-woods swaths of white barked birches. Their beautiful bark and rich yellow fall color speak volumes to one's soul in the crisp fall air. A brother (or sister) tree, the river birch can be as awe inspiring in a similar, but decidedly different way when one glimpses the sheets of tan, peeling bark up close. River birch can grow 50 to 90 feet tall but is often seen 40 to 50 feet. In nature, it normally grows with a central leader and small-diameter, dark-colored lateral branches. It has a narrow, oval to pyramidal crown when young, spreading wider with age as several branches become dominant. It is distinguished by reddish, brown bark peeling off in film-like papery curls providing interest all year round.



Cultivated river birch trees are often grown as multi-stemmed specimens. When they are wet from rain, their branches droop, so regular pruning in the early years will be required to remove lower branches when they are located close to areas where clearance is needed. River birch occurs naturally along stream beds from Massachusetts to Florida. It strongly prefers moisture, but will tolerate dry soils. Some birches will live as long as 300 years. Unlike most birches, the river birch prefers partial shade, and may suffer leaf burn in full summer sun. River Birch is somewhat sensitive to being transplanted in autumn, and care should be taken to amend the soil, fertilize, water thoroughly, mulch adequately, and avoid winter salt spray, to enhance survival chances during the first winter

The strongly exfoliating bark of River Birch has orange, gray, and lavender colors, combined with a multi-trunked form, is the ornamental highlight of this species and its various selections and cultivars. *Betula nigra* 'Heritage'- the popular cultivar of choice, possesses great vigor and is primarily noted for its heavily exfoliating (peeling) branches in the 2" to 6" diameter range which yield a cream, salmon, orange, lavender, and gray combination of bark colors, making it an excellent Midwestern and Southern substitute in the United States for Paper Birch and other white-barked birches, the latter of which often develop heavy Bronze Birch Borer infestations with age, leading to branch dieback and tree death unless annual preventive spray programs are implemented. Heritage River Birch and other selections of this species are superior substitutes for the over-utilized shade tree known as Silver Maple (*Acer saccharinum*), since, in addition to its above-listed attributes, River Birch has wood that, although rapidly growing and relatively lightweight, is not brittle and therefore not prone to wind or ice damage, as is Silver Maple. River Birch is also much more symmetrically growing, has fewer and smaller surface roots, and does not have fruit litter problems, as does Silver Maple.



River birch has a pyramidal shape and a branch spread of up to 40 feet so it does not want to be planted within 20 feet of homes and other multi-story buildings.