

Gary Birch

Betula populifolia

White Birch

A small North American native tree, Gray Birch reaches 20-30 feet in height with a 10-20 foot spread, often forming loose, open thickets in the wild but easily trained to a single, upright, slender trunk and pyramidal silhouette. The sharp, triangularly shaped leaves distinguish it from other birches and turn a lovely yellow autumn color before dropping. For the first few years, the bark is dark brown, but later takes on a smooth, chalky-white appearance but does not peel as readily as the bark of other white birches. Its slender, delicate branches are prone to storm and ice damage. As kids, we'd shimmy up the 10-15 foot slender trunks and swing back and forth until it gracefully lowered us to the ground. Gray Birch is a common component of the Orion Farms natural forest area.



Identification

Leaves

Deciduous, alternate, simple, pinnately veined, triangular with an elongated acute tip and doubly serrate margin. Turns yellow in the autumn.



Flower/Fruit

Monoecious; perfect and inconspicuous in early spring. Cone like cylindrical inch long fruits, deciduous at maturity releasing two-winged nutlets.



Bark/Wood

Brown when immature turning chalky white with age. Generally smooth and not peeling. Black triangles apparent below branches.



Form

Small tree with poor form and a limby bole. Without training, the crown is irregular with somewhat drooping branches. Thickets in the wild.



Uses

A pioneer species, Gray Birch is useful in reclamation of surface mine sites. Used in landscaping. Important to wildlife. Used as wood fuel, but low in heat value. Small wood products like spools, spindles, and other turned pieces.

Ethnobotany

Native Americans used a bark concoction for swollen or infected cuts.

Native Distribution

Northern tier of North America.

Establishment

Seedlings benefit from shade for first couple of summers.

Growing Conditions and Culture

Mature Size 30'Hx20'Wx1'dbh
 USDA Zone 3-8
 Light Requirements Part to Full Sun

Soils Diverse
 Drought Tolerant? Moderate
 Inundation Tolerant? Moderate

Pests/Damaging Agents

Birch leaf miner that disfigures foliage but does not kill. Susceptible to fire but resprouts from stumps. Prone to wind, ice, and storm damage.

Similar Species

Paper Birch
 The bark of Paper Birch exfoliates frequently and easily while Gray Birch bark is taut. The leaf of Paper Birch is much more ovate.

Propagation

Seed - cold stratify for 4-8 weeks. Root from cuttings.

Source(s)

Orion Farms, Philadelphia, NY.