Birches

Genus Characteristics

Bark: Birches typically have visible lenticels and pale bark. Lenticels are a horizontal raised line of pores where gas exchange takes place. Bark coloration, furrowing, and exfoliation are all clues to species ID.

Betula papyrifera

Betula nigra

Leaves: Birches have simple alternate leaves with serrated leaf margins and cordate (heart-shaped) leaves. Some cultivars of European birch have "cut leaves", which are finely lobed. Shape of leaf base and leaf size are important species indicators.

Betula papyrifera

Betula pendula

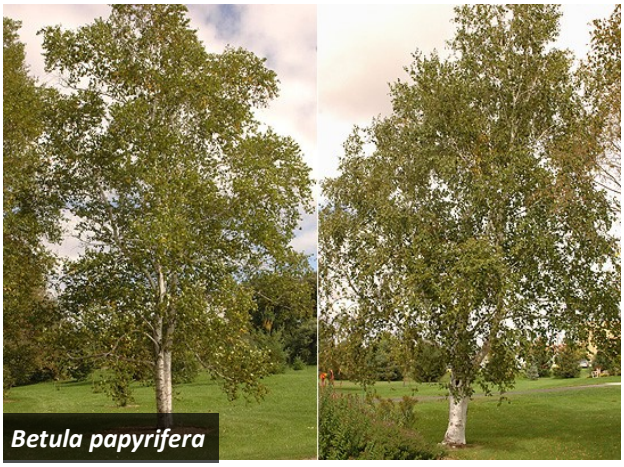
Fruit: Birch trees bear their seeds on a cone that is about an inch long. Cones disintegrate at maturity and winged seeds disperse. If cones are present, look for pubescence (hairs) on scales to determine species ID. Cones appear in late summer, after flowering. Flowers are nondescript catkins.

Betula alleghaniensis

Betula papyrifera

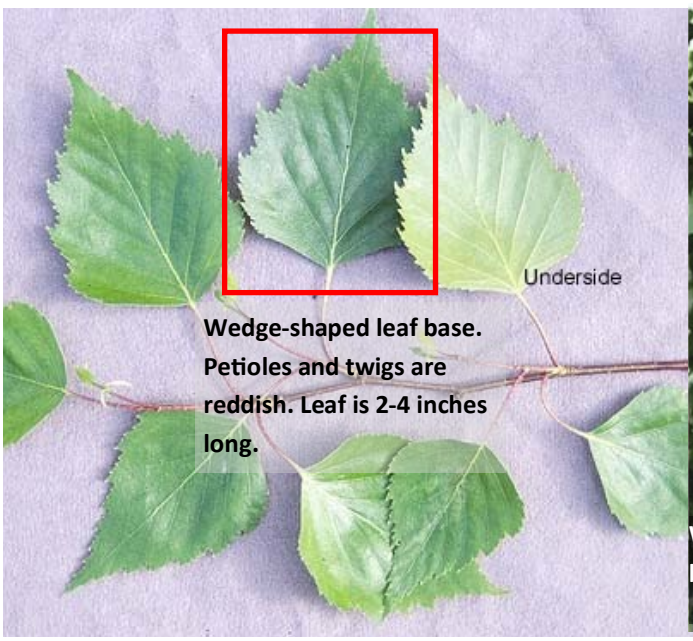
Form: Birch trees are medium-sized trees, maturing to a maximum of about 60 feet (depending on species). Many species can be multistemmed. Form is usually pyramidal. Branches can be pendulous.

Betula nigra


Betula papyrifera

Birches

Betula pendula—European weeping birch



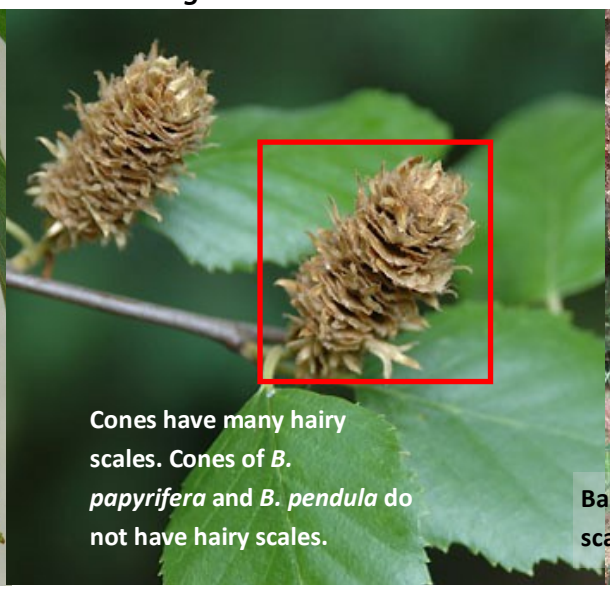
Wedge-shaped leaf base. Petioles and twigs are reddish. Leaf is 2-4 inches long.

White bark develops gray-black fissures with age.

Fine branches tend to droop. Crown is open and pyramidal.

Betula nigra—River birch

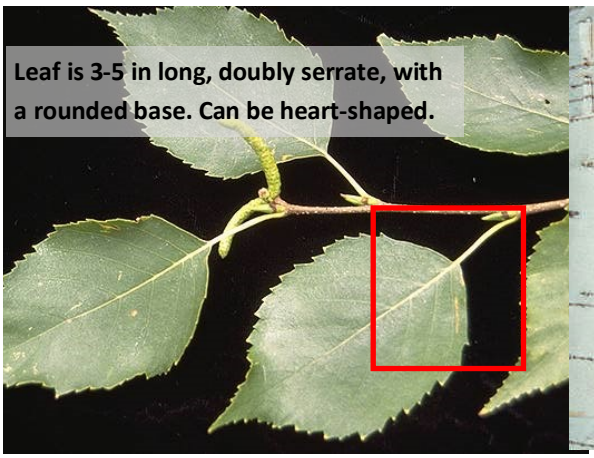
Leaves are small (1.5-2.5 in) with conspicuous doubly serrate margins. Fuzzy hairs on the



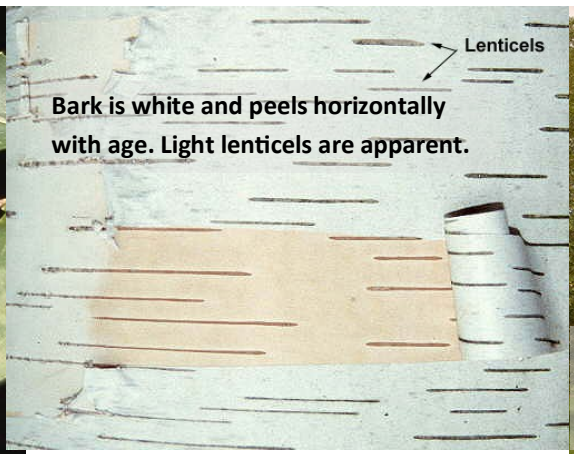
Cones have many hairy scales. Cones of *B. papyrifera* and *B. pendula* do not have hairy scales.

Bark is rust-colored. Papery scales flake off trunk.

Betula papyrifera—Paperbark birch



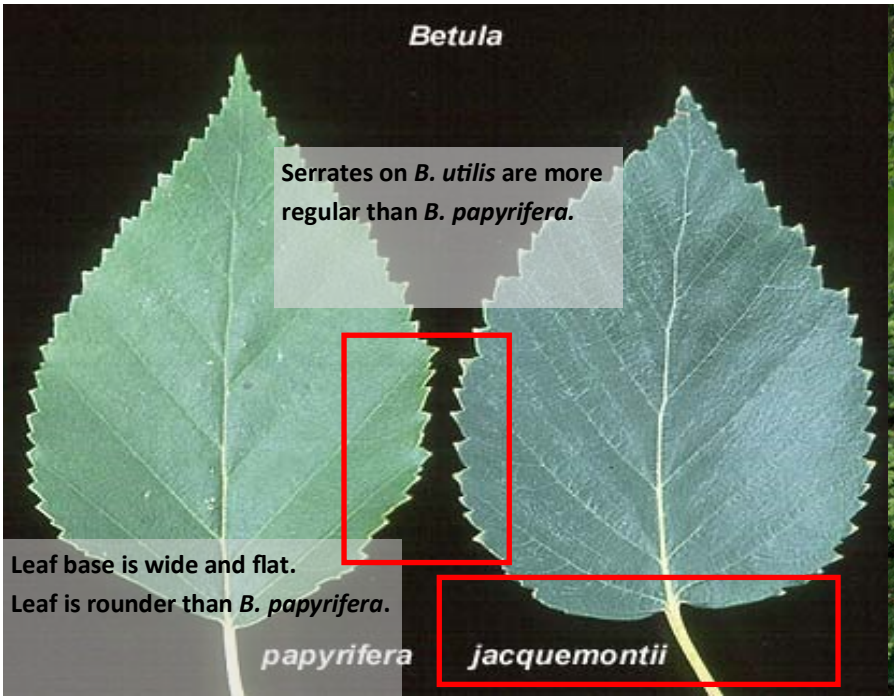
Leaf is 3-5 in long, doubly serrate, with a rounded base. Can be heart-shaped.

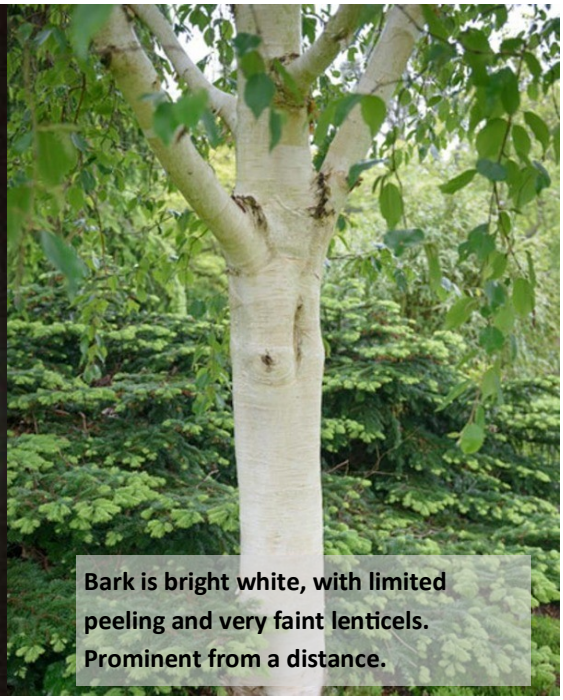


Bark is white and peels horizontally with age. Light lenticels are apparent.

Form is upright and irregular. Can have multiple trunks.

***Betula utilis var. jacquemontii*—Himalayan white birch**





Birch trees look very similar across species. There are many cultivars in the nursery trade and many variations from tree to tree. Key identifying features are small and may not be immediately apparent on every tree. If you are unsure of the species, please take a sample! If Urban Forestry staff doesn't know, we'll send it to the experts at Hoyt Arboretum.