

A Case For Getting To Know Your Trees

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When I tell you that I first caught my boyfriend's attention with my tree identification skills, it's barely an exaggeration. We were out for an autumn hike with a group of fellow graduate students when he started pointing out a charming assortment of birds through the branches: the bright crest of a cheeping Ruby-Crowned Kinglet, the fluttering hops of a migrating Blackpoll Warbler, and the long, banded tail of a soaring American Kestrel. Not to be outdone, but lacking in his superpowers of bird identification, I repaid his observations with a glimpse at the magic to be found in the branches themselves.



1 American Witch-hazel (Hamamelis virginiana)

Tucked under the flared golden leaves of a hunched witch-hazel, I shared a constellation of star-like yellow flowers, strappy golden petals fluttering in the breeze. From a rocky overlook, I pointed out the patchwork of oak trees, identifiable by just the color of their foliage: purple for White Oaks, scarlet for Red Oaks, brown for the rest. Hurling off the trail at the familiar sight of dark, plated bark, I offered him a seemingly unremarkable twig from a Black Birch tree - unremarkable, that is, until the peeled back bark revealed the startlingly sharp scent of wintergreen: refreshing, unmistakable, and utterly unexpected.

Needless to say, my tree-ID skills quickly won him over. While I can't promise you such immediate rewards from learning tree identification yourself, I can promise you one thing: the more you get to know your trees, the more joy you will always find walking among them.



2 Eastern Redcedar (Juniperus virginiana)

This remains true even now, while the leaves and flowers in our wintering forests are few and far between. Beyond the inevitable smugness of recognizing a species from only its bark or its buds, there's an inherent comfort to knowing which trees you're among even when they are without their flashiest features - and from that, knowing exactly which acorns, foliage, or critters you might expect to find when you return in the warmer months. But how is it that we can actually learn to recognize the trees around us, especially when - at first glance - they all seem so alike?

Luckily for identification novices, most of the trees comprising our forests belong to a few very recognizable types. Sometimes, even one or two traits are enough to tell you exactly what you're looking at. For example, if you can currently spot green foliage on nearly any of our wild, wintering trees, chances are it belongs to one of only four species! Either that green comes from the shiny leaves of a shrubby, gnarled mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*) - our Connecticut state flower! - or to the evergreen needles of a conifer: the long, soft needles of White Pine (*Pinus strobus*); the short, sharp needles of Eastern Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*); or the flattened, bristled scales of Eastern Redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*).

Admittedly, it gets a little trickier when you find yourself staring at nondescript gray/brown bark and dull, unremarkable twigs - especially when they haven't got any leaves attached to them. That's when you have to start getting a little more up close and personal with the tree. I often find it helpful to start with two key questions: First, where is this tree growing? Second, is there anything - however small - that is remarkable about it?

The first question is all about habitat. Is the tree in a sunny forest edge or a deep, shaded wood? Are your shoes drenched in mud or perched high on a rocky ledge? No combination of these factors favor the same species, and simple details like how wet your feet are can tell you immediately whether you might have a swamp-loving elm or a drought-tolerant hickory.



3 Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*)



4 Bear Oak (*Quercus ilicifolia*)



5 American Beech (*Fagus grandifolia*)

The second question is all about details. How does the bark feel? What do the buds look like? How do the twigs smell? While few wintering trees have a plethora of remarkable features, they all have something - and sometimes, just the buds are enough! For example, Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*) buds are invariably spherical and red, while oak (*Quercus* spp.) buds always clump tightly at the end of each twig and American Beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) buds are so sharp and pointy that the mnemonic device for remembering what they are is in response to how much it hurts when they stab you ('Son of a beech!').



6 Northern Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)



7 American Hazelnut (*Corylus americana*)



8 Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*)

Winter tree identification can be tricky, but one of its top selling points is that the better you know winter trees, the sooner you'll be able to spot the first, subtle signs of spring. I used to wait impatiently only for daffodils and the first flush of leaves. Now I know that a month earlier, I can find smatterings of tiny, bright yellow flowers dotting the spicebushes; sprinklings of pink, anemone-like petals peeking out from the hazelnuts; and explosions of scarlet blooms on the abundant Red Maples.

I've always found there to be plenty of joy in knowing these features of our trees just for the sake of knowing them. But more than a few times, pointing out subtle distinctions like the Red Maple's rounded crimson buds versus the Sugar Maple's sharp brown ones has led to the question of why it matters. Why do I bother getting to know the trees? And - perhaps more to the point for most weary questioners - why do I keep trying to share that knowledge with them?

There are innumerable answers to these questions, but I think perhaps the easiest is that knowing begets caring. It's difficult to explain why the death of an old Sugar Maple brings tears to my eyes while the removal of a similar-sized Norway Maple earns a thumbs-up to someone who doesn't know the difference between the two; it's difficult to express the importance of



9 Black/Sweet Birch (*Betula lenta*)

maintaining native tree diversity to someone who sees any forest as simply a forest, and any tree as simply a tree. When we learn to recognize our trees, we learn what makes them unique - the longevity of the beeches, the sustaining nuts of the hickories, the regenerative power of the birches - and consequently, what makes the forest we stand in tick, in a way that's slightly different than any other forest we've ever stood in before.

This is what makes tree identification most worthwhile to me and, hopefully, to increasingly more folks around me. On your next stroll outside, take a look at the different buds preparing to open all around you. Run your fingers over the fuzzy twigs of the sumacs and the deep furrows of the oak bark. Stop and smell the birches. The trees are out there - they're waiting for you!