

How to identify . . . **trees**



Our grandparents' and great-grandparents' generations could put a name to most of the trees they would see on hikes out of town; but in the past few decades we seem to have lost this rich store of knowledge. Many people today on a walk through a forest are unable to tell which trees they are passing; this is a great pity, because once you can put a name to a tree you can also learn a lot more about it and the wild creatures that depend on it.

Trees are a wonderful aspect of the wild world. North America is home to the world's biggest, tallest, and oldest trees—750 species in all—and these mighty giants are as much a part of our natural heritage as bald eagles and grizzly bears. Indeed, given how many creatures depend on trees for their own survival, trees may be the most important living things on the continent.

To identify which tree you are looking at, it's best to use a range of different features. For some, like the oak and sycamore, the leaves are really distinctive; while for others, like the beech and elm, the overall shape of the tree also helps you. Buds, flowers, seeds and fruits, and the bark are also good ways of telling one tree from another.



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White oak

One of the most familiar of our sixty different kinds of oak, though mainly found from the eastern United States to the Midwest, the white oak is a common tree of woods, hillsides, and riverbanks. Its distinctive seeds are acorns. Produced in fall, they are a favorite food of many animals, including squirrels.



Eastern cottonwood

This member of the poplar family is found from the Rocky Mountains to the eastern United States, where it grows in low-lying areas near water known as bottomlands. Triangular leaves with coarse teeth, sticky buds, and, later in the summer, green pods produce fluffy, cottonlike seeds.



American sycamore

Widespread across the eastern and midwestern United States and south to Florida, this tall tree has very distinctive, broad leaves, round fruits, and a mottled bark, which often peels off in large flakes.



Sugar maple

The classic "maple syrup" plant (see page 238 for a recipe for maple syrup candy). Like other maples, the sugar maple's leaves are not alternate but paired opposite along the twig. Mainly grows on well-drained soils in the northeastern United States.



Quaking aspen

The most widely distributed tree in North America, found in dry woods across much of the United States, this member of the poplar family is a medium-size, fast-growing tree with small, heart-shaped leaves and pale, gray-green bark crossed with dark marks. Seeds and buds provide food for a wide range of creatures.



California redwood

Also known as the coast redwood, this magnificent tree—the tallest, and one of the oldest, living things in the world—can be found along a narrow strip along the Pacific Coast, where it thrives in moist, damp soil.





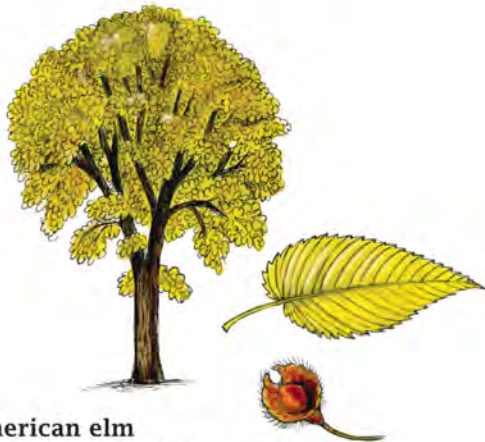
Douglas fir

Named after a nineteenth-century Scottish botanist and explorer, this huge and impressive conifer grows up the Pacific Coast and along the slopes of the Rocky Mountains. Has flat, yellowish green needles and hanging cones.



White pine

The two species of white pine, eastern and western, can be found in the cooler regions of North America, growing on sandy soils and in boggy areas. Needles come in groups of five.



American elm

Also known as the white elm, this tree grows to sixty feet tall, with a broad, spreading crown giving it a distinctive shape. Leaves are oval and pointed, with serrated edges; twigs are gray with chestnut-colored buds. Found mainly in the eastern United States to the Midwest. Sadly, this species is very susceptible to Dutch elm disease.



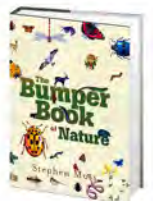
Eastern red cedar

A member of the same family as junipers, this medium-size tree provides juicy, purple fruits that are a vital food for many different birds and mammals—and as a result it benefits by having its seeds spread.



American beech

One of the iconic trees of the eastern forests, whose pale gray bark and paperlike leaves make it unmistakable. In fall it produces pods containing two or three triangular brown nuts, which are a much-needed winter food for many creatures.



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