

Betula lenta

[Synonyms : *Betula carpinifolia*, *Betula excelsa*]

BLACK BIRCH is a deciduous tree. Native to eastern North America it has catkins of tiny flowers and leaves that turn rich yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as American black birch, Birch, Black cherry birch, *Bříza habrolistá* (Czech), *Bříza tuhá* (Czech), Cherry birch, Hogany, Mahogany, Mahogany birch, Mountain birch, Mountain mahogany, Red birch, River birch, *Sockerbjörk* (Swedish), *Sokerikoivu* (Finnish), Spice birch, Sweet birch, and Yellow birch.

Sweetly aromatic oil, known as ‘sweet birch oil’, is extracted from twigs and the inner bark. *Lenta* means ‘tough and flexible’.

The sugary sap is used in the Spring to make birch beer, and it will also yield sugar which is only half as sweet as any from sugar maple (*Acer saccharum*). In Spring in Kamchatka, the large peninsular off the north-eastern coast of Siberia, the inner bark has been cut into vermicelli-like strips and dried and stored for winter food, when the strips have been boiled with caviar and fish. A report is also said to exist that declares that Confederate soldiers, retreating from the 1861 Battle of Carricks Ford during the American Civil War, believed they owed their lives to the availability of the bark when their supplies of food ran out. Young twigs can also be used to make, what is understood to be, a palatable wintergreen-flavoured (*Gaultheria procumbens*) tea – a tea that was familiar to the North American Iroquois Indians.

Of all the North American tribes records note that some of the Chippewa not only used the bark in building their lodges but also used it for making their canoes, for making storage containers, and for cooking dishes as well. The importance of the bark for this particular tribe is illustrated by the fact that they placed some of it (or that of a closely related species) on the coffin when a member of the tribe was being buried.

Several North American Indian tribes (including the Algonkin and Mohican Indians) used the leaves or bark of black birch in medicines. It was taken by the Cherokee and Iroquois for colds, and the Chippewa used it for various lung ailments. The Cherokee and Chippewa Indians prescribed it for treating diarrhoea and dysentery, and the former also employed it as a remedy for some stomach upsets. It is believed to have been especially respected by the Iroquois who, apart from the foregoing, also used it in remedies for some female problems, for blood disorders and for easing fever.

It is from this North American species that ‘sweet birch oil’ is obtained and is used almost exclusively instead of the similar ‘oil of wintergreen’. When a perfume known as ‘Russian leather’ was at the height of its popularity the Russian Government of the day kept the recipe a guarded secret which helped to maintain the demand for it.

Subsequently it was learnt that this perfume was made from part of the bark of black birch not wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*) as some had supposed.

Today the very-strong, richly-marked dark brown wood is used commercially by cabinetmakers and also for making agricultural implements and for shipbuilding.

Medicinally, herbalists have used the oil to treat dysentery, acute rheumatism and some female disorders.