

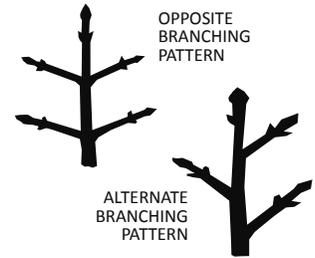


TREE OF THE MONTH

Hop Hornbeam • *Ostrya virginiana*

OTHER COMMON NAMES: IRONWOOD, HORNBEAM

HABITAT American hop hornbeams are important native understory trees in eastern North America and some mountain ranges in Mexico. They rarely reach over 40 feet tall and often have a rounded crown that spreads between 20 and 30 feet. Hop hornbeams grow in an alternate branching pattern.



TOOTHY LEAVES

Like other members of the birch (Betulaceae) family, hop hornbeams have ovate leaves with pointed tips and sharply serrated edges. Hop hornbeam leaves are a bright green in the spring and summer and turn yellow in the autumn, often dropping early in the season.

ENVIRONMENT

While hop hornbeams prefer well-drained, slightly acidic soils, they can adapt to just about any soil conditions, and can be found from rocky, upland slopes to clay-rich environments. Hop hornbeams tolerate drought and poor soils well.



NOT RECOMMENDED FOR BREWING

Fertilized female flowers, on trees older than 25 years old, develop into fruits over the course of the summer and are mature around August in the Berkshires. The fruits resemble hops, lending this tree its common name, but do not share hops' culinary and medicinal characteristics. These flowers have an astonishing ability to cast seeds far and wide from the mother tree. The cluster of fruits in papery sacs is called a **strobile** and begins to break up soon after ripening.



SPRING FLOWER Hop hornbeams flower in the spring and produce both male and female flowers on the same tree (meaning that they are monoecious). The flowers are dense, drooping spikes (catkins) of blooms with male catkins reaching up to a couple of inches in length and female catkins rarely reaching over 1 inch. Both the buds and the blooming catkins are important winter food for some birds, including the ruffed grouse (*Bonasa umbellus*).

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS Young hop hornbeams have mostly smooth, gray bark with small lenticels (pore-like tissue). On mature trees, hop hornbeam bark is rougher and narrow shaggy bits often peel off the tree in slender, elongated strips running vertically. Mature hop hornbeams can be confused with shag-bark hickory on first glance but a defining characteristic is the hop hornbeam's narrow strips of bark as opposed to the hickory's wider bark strips that criss-cross down the trunk.



BIRCH RELATIVES American hop hornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*) is related to the European hop hornbeam (*Carpinus betulus*). Both are in the birch family. European farmers commonly used their hop hornbeam to make oxen yokes – giving rise to the name “hornbeam.” In North America we have another native tree called “hornbeam,” *Carpinus caroliniana*, and while this tree has similar leaves, the smooth, gray-blue bark and rippling trunks resembling muscles or sinews distinguish the two. *Carpinus caroliniana* is sometimes called ironwood, hornbeam, or blue beech.

MANY USES Hop hornbeam lumber is utilized for a variety of uses – mostly as tool handles and fenceposts – that take advantage of the wood's hard and durable character. Native American tribes made use of hop hornbeam medicinally to treat toothache, muscle soreness, respiratory issues, and kidney issues.

