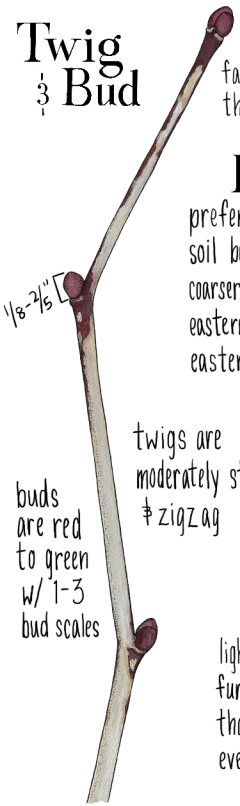
American Basswood

Tilia americana

Twig & Bud



false terminal buds that are lopsided

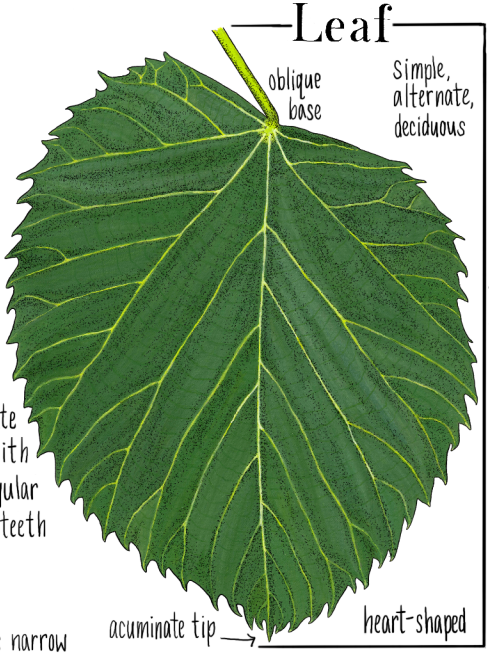
twigs are moderately stout & zigzag

buds are red to green w/ 1-3 bud scales

Habitat

prefers deep, moist, fertile soil but can tolerate drier, coarser soils; found in the eastern U.S. and south-eastern Canada

Leaf



Bark

light gray to brown; develops narrow furrows w/ long, flat-topped ridges that have parallel edges; ridges eventually become interlaced

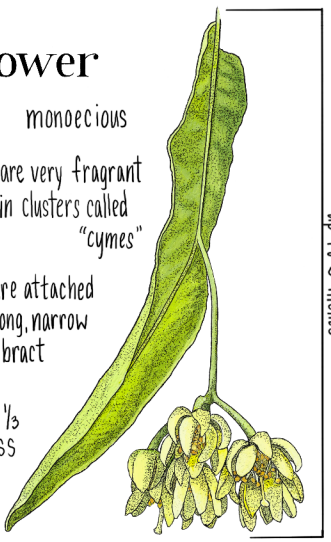
Flower

monoecious

flowers are very fragrant & appear in clusters called "cymes"

cymes are attached to a long, narrow leafy bract

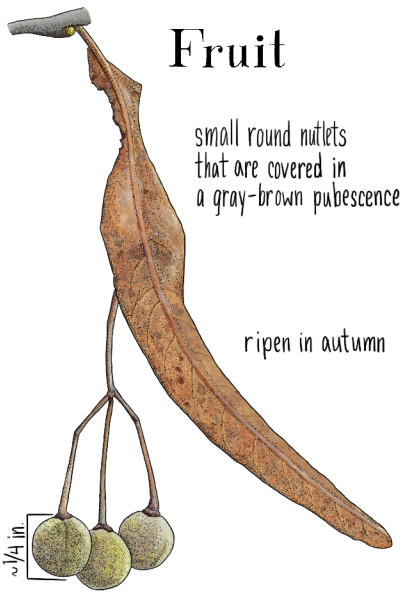
flowers ~1/3 inch across



Fruit

small round nutlets that are covered in a gray-brown pubescence

ripen in autumn



TREE OF THE MONTH

American Basswood • *Tilia americana*

ALSO KNOWN AS: AMERICAN LINDEN

American basswood (*Tilia americana*) is a medium to large deciduous shade tree belonging to the mallow family (Malvaceae). Typically growing to heights of 50 to 80 feet, it will occasionally reach up to 100 feet. This tree has a statuesque form, growing tall and broad with a round crown and dense foliage. Its stately form is one reason it's a commonly planted street tree. However, it's worth noting that when growing without interruption and little competition, basswood will sprout multiple shoots from its base, forming clumps of several stems. These sprouts will often form a cluster of sizeable trees around what was once the original tree.

OPPOSITE BRANCHING PATTERN | ALTERNATE BRANCHING PATTERN | WHORLED BRANCHING PATTERN

American basswood can be found across much of the eastern United States and parts of southeastern Canada. It does best in deep, moist, fertile soil, but can also be found on drier, coarser soil such as the sand dunes of Lake Michigan.

Basswood's branches, twigs, and leaves grow in an alternate pattern. American basswood has **simple** leaves with a rounded, oblique base, meaning it's asymmetrical on either side of the **petiole**. The leaves are broadly heart-shaped (cordate) with coarsely serrated edges that have long, pointed teeth and an abruptly **acuminate** tip. The underside of the leaf is a paler green, but can sometimes be a whitish, silvery color and slightly hairy.

The young bark of American basswood pretty quickly begins to show vertical cracks with small horizontal hairline cracks in between. The bark is a light gray to light brown, and as it matures, it develops narrow furrows and long, flat-topped ridges that have parallel edges. Over time, the ridges eventually begin to interlace.

American basswood has moderately stout twigs that are distinctly zigzag. They can range in color depending on the time of year (green in summer; red in winter), and often have a splotchy multicolor pattern with gray. The winter twigs have false **terminal buds** that are plump and lopsided, with one side disproportionately bulging out. The buds are red or green and have 1-3 **bud scales**.

Basswoods are monoecious, meaning an individual tree produces both male and female flowers. They produce **cymes** of fragrant, pale yellow flowers that appear below a long and narrow, gracefully curving leafy bract. Each cyme connects to a **bract** somewhere between the base and the midpoint. In Massachusetts, these clusters of flowers bloom in late spring to early summer. Eventually, the cyme produces small, round nutlets that are covered in a fine gray-brown pubescence (soft, short hair). Like the flower, the nutlets occur in hanging clusters that are attached to a curving, leafy bract that acts as a wing. They ripen in the fall.

The flowers of American basswood attract an abundance of bees while in bloom, and the honey made from the nectar is a gourmet item. Also, the trunk of basswood often develops deep cavities, making it an ideal nesting habitat for woodpeckers and other animals. Basswood shoots are a favorite food for rabbits, and deer also browse its twigs. The tree's buds are eaten by several bird species, and chipmunks frequently gather and store the fruit.

The genus name *Tilia* comes from the Latin name for linden or lime tree. The species epithet of American basswood is in obvious reference to its native territory. The common name "basswood" is derived from "bastwood," referring to the tree's strong inner bark (or bast) which was traditionally used to craft items like rope and mats. Its soft wood is suited for carving, and was used by some Indigenous tribes to create masks.

There are two other *Tilia* species that are commonly found planted in the eastern United States and look quite similar to American basswood; most often, one will find the littleleaf linden (*Tilia cordata*). This species is a common street and landscaping tree, and it's also known to escape cultivation and naturalize in the New England landscape.

BEAT
Berkshire Environmental ACTION TEAM

Tree of the Month is sponsored by Berkshire Environmental Action Team, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located in Pittsfield, MA. Find more Trees of the Month at www.thebeatnews.org.

simple (of a leaf): a leaf blade that is one piece, although it may be deeply lobed, divided, or dissected
acuminate: (of a plant or animal structure, e.g., a leaf) tapering to a point
terminal buds: the buds located at the very tip of a plant's stem or branch that are responsible for the upward and outward growth of a plant; a true terminal bud is typically larger and has no leaf scar
petiole: the stalk of a leaf that joins it to the twig
bud scales: modified leaves that cover and protect the bud through winter
cyme: a flat- or round-topped flower cluster in which each individual flower stalk ends in a single flower and the first flower blooms at the top or in the center
bract: a modified or specialized leaf, associated with the reproductive structure such as a flower, inflorescence, or cone scale

This educational leaflet was made possible thanks to the Woodlands Partnership of Northwest Massachusetts.