

Hickory Trees, Woodland Food

By Susan Camp

When I sit at my desk in the nook at the top of the stairs, I look out on all of our tall trees: beeches, oaks, pines, river birches, and the straight, slim hickories, the tallest of which is in my direct line of sight. I love the trees at every season, but the cold winter weather every year offers me renewed appreciation for their strength and resilience. In the winter, I can see their bones, the branches reaching upward and outward. Here there might be a squirrel's nest, or drey, fashioned of dry leaves; there, I might see festoons of mistletoe, too high to reach a sprig to hang in a doorway for the holidays.

Over the years, I have written about many of our trees and trees we don't have on our property. Somehow, I have missed writing about hickory trees, *Carya* spp. *Carya* comes from the Greek word for walnut, and hickory and pecan trees belong to the walnut family.

About 18 species of hickories exist, 12 of them in North America. Most hickory species are native to eastern North America, from southern Canada and New England south to the Gulf Coast and west to eastern Texas and northeastern Mexico.

Hickory trees require rich humusy, well-drained soil with medium moisture. Once established, the trees are drought tolerant. They grow best in full sun, but will tolerate light shade. Hickories are large trees, reaching heights from 50 to 80 feet, and occasionally 100 feet, at maturity. With spreads of 30 to 60 feet, they need plenty of space to grow. Once planted, hickories are difficult to move because of a deep taproot. The tall, straight trees have broadly columnar canopies and make excellent shade trees. In a forest environment, hickory trees will grow tall and straight with a compact canopy situated near the top.

Hickories are slow-growing trees that produce hard, dense wood for hardwood flooring and furniture. The wood was used in the past to make wagon wheels, oxen yokes, ladders, and tool handles. The fragrant wood is also used to smoke meat.

Several hickory species are found throughout the southern United States, including mockernut hickory (*Carya tomentosa*) and bitternut hickory (*C. cordiformis*). Other species include shagbark (*C. ovata*) and shellbark (*C. laciniata*).

Hickory bark is gray and tends to darken over time. The bark grows in longitudinal furrows, although certain characteristics vary depending on the species. Shagbark, for example, peels off in long strips as the trees age.

Hickory leaves are composed of 5 to 7 long, ovoid, serrated leaflets growing opposite one another on a stem with a single terminal leaflet. Leaves turn bright yellow in the fall. Non-showy male and female yellowish-green flowers bloom in April and May. Male flowers are 4 to 6 inch drooping catkins, depending on the species. After about 25 years, the female flowers, which grow on short spikes, produce nuts, which actually are fleshy fruits called drupes. The nuts, which are encased in husks that split open in the fall when ripe, may be edible or not, depending on the species. Bitternut, for example, has an unpleasant flavor, although it is not toxic.

Mockernuts are difficult to remove from husks. The best flavor is found in *C. illinoensis*, the botanical name for the delicious, much-loved pecan. Yes, the pecans we use in pies, cookies, and snacks are hickory nuts.

Humans aren't the only mammals that enjoy munching on the flavorful species of hickory nuts. Squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, and black bears also enjoy these tasty treats. Unfortunately, these forest critters, particularly the squirrels, don't clean up their messes and leave a lot of shell and leaf litter on the ground for the humans to rake up.

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