

You Can Tell a Tree By its Bark

What you see on the outside of a tree is really aging bark. As a tree ages, it splits and stretches its bark as if it were trying to burst out of its skin. This stretching creates lots of interesting patterns and appearances in the bark depending on the tree species.



SHAGBARK HICKORY



MANGROVE



SYCAMORE



PONDEROSA PINE



WHITE BIRCH



REDWOOD

How to Read a Tree by its Bark

One of the easiest ways to identify a tree is to look at its leaf. Another way is its bark. What we see on the outside is really aging bark which, in the case of the giant sequoia, might be two feet thick. Underneath its rough exterior, cells are forming new layers of bark for the tree. As the tree ages, it splits and cracks back its bark as if it were trying to break out of its skin. This stretching process creates different patterns of peeling in the bark depending on its species.



SHAGBARK HICKORY

This tree gets its name from the way the long, flat plates of bark break free on either end and curl away from the trunk as it ages, giving it a shaggy appearance. The unusual bark texture makes it a good specimen tree for naturalistic landscapes and once identified, it's hard to miss!



MANGROVE

The mangrove's leathery bark helps it to adapt to its unique habitat, which is typically swamp-like. The bark has astringent properties and contains a high percentage of tannin, used in tanning leather. The bark is charcoal gray to blackish with a whitish streak. Its roots are covered with corky, water-resistant bark to resist the strong acids that form in the mud.



SYCAMORE

Sycamore's distinctive bark is a patchwork of browns, yellows, and greens against a background of white. As the tree grows, the darker bark falls away in thin brittle sheets, exposing younger and lighter-colored bark. Throughout its history, the bark was used in medicines to cure many maladies.



PONDEROSA PINE

The Ponderosa pine's bark doesn't change to its mature orange color until after eighty or a hundred years! Up until then, its bark is black and scaly. Its thick, cracking bark (which, on a hot day, smells like vanilla) protects the tree from ground fires.



WHITE BIRCH

White birch, also called paper birch, is a beautiful, ornamental tree with paper-thin strips of bark that peel off easily. Pioneers used this bark for paper and canoes. Unfortunately the tree is often damaged in ornamental plantings because people can't resist peeling its bark! Because the bark of paper birch is thin and highly flammable, even large trees can be quickly killed by fires.



REDWOOD

The bark of the mighty redwood tree can grow to be as much as a foot thick! It is very resistant to fire and insects, and exhibits an unusual property when exposed to fire – it turns into a protective barrier, similar to how a heat shield on a re-entry vehicle works.