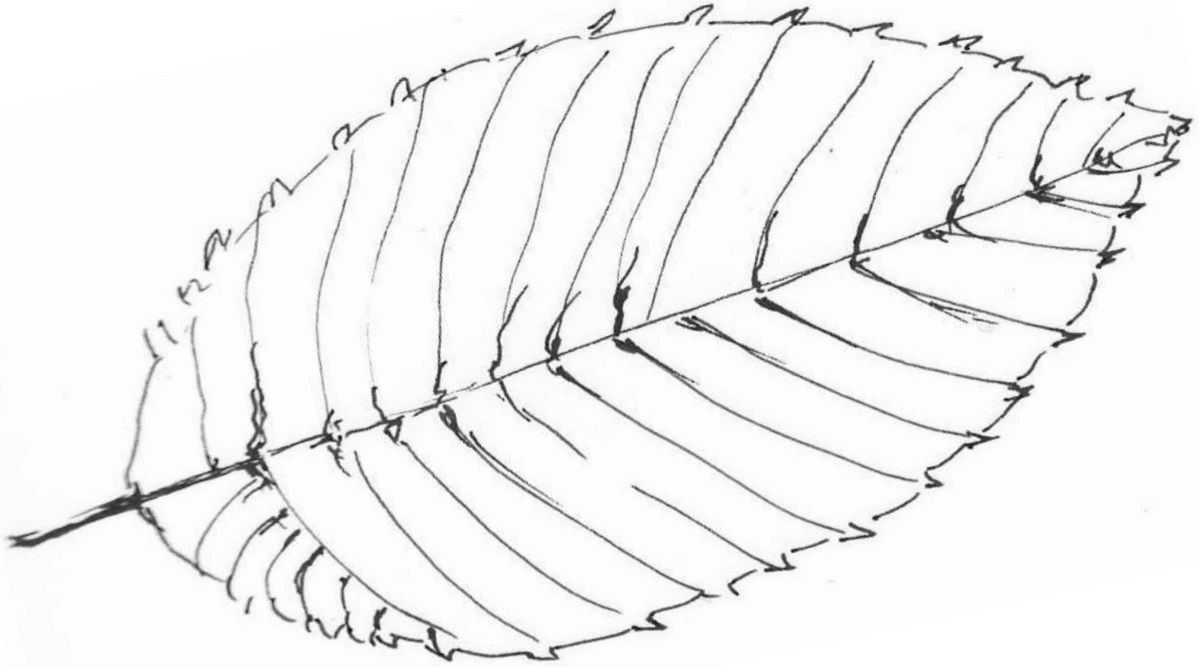


Beech

Fagus spp.



How can one not absolutely adore a beech tree? Beech trees have large spreading crowns and a very distinctive smooth, light gray bark that looks remarkably like elephant skin. These trees are high and wide and especially beautiful at maturity. Birds and squirrels create their homes amidst the branches and the annual harvest of beechnuts provide food for all kinds of creatures.

The beeches are among the most majestic trees at the Arnold Arboretum. Two main species grow at the Arboretum, American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) and the European beech (*Fagus sylvatica*). Both have simple toothed leaves, and prickly fruit.

European beeches are large shade trees commonly planted in parks and gardens, described by many experts as the finest specimen tree available. Tree expert Michael Dirr hales it as “so beautiful that it overwhelms one at first glance.” They are also the parent source of many interesting beech cultivars such as pendulous, twisted, columnar, dwarfed, and copper-leaved. European beech has unmatched year-round beauty — shimmering green leaves unfurling in the spring, dense shade in the summer, striking copper, golden-bronze autumn foliage, and a pleasing winter silhouette.

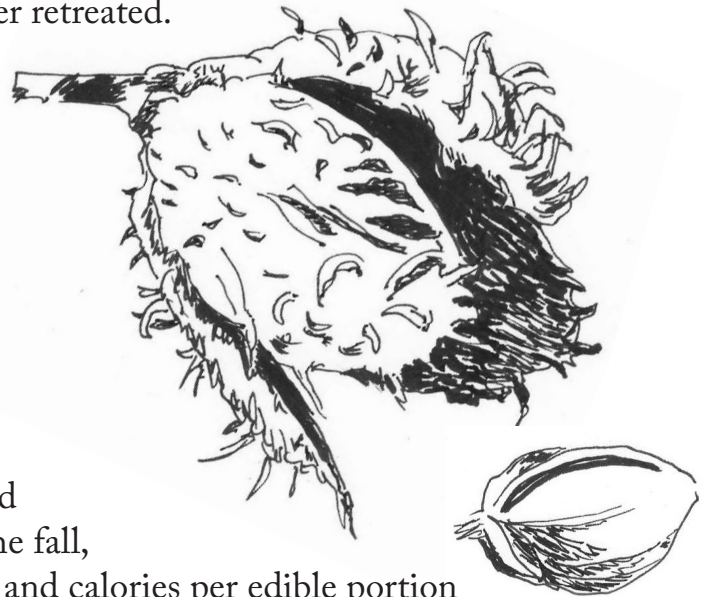
Our Native Beech

Tree expert, Michael Dirr, describes our native, American beech as “a sturdy, imposing tree often with a short trunk and wide-spreading crown, a picture of character.” American beech are often in native forests, where they spread by shoots rising from their shallow roots to form large colonies. It is possible that every beech in a wooded area spread from the same tree, though the original would have decayed long ago. Some beech trees in our region could be 7,000 years old, since the first seed may have been carried here by now-extinct passenger pigeons after the last glacier retreated.

FRUIT

The fruit consists of a bur, which usually contains 3 triangular edible nuts.

Beechnuts are an important, nutrient-dense food source for wildlife including black bear, white-tailed deer, wild turkeys, blue jays, nuthatches, woodpeckers, chipmunks, and fox. Eastern chipmunks store beechnuts deep in underground burrows. While oak and beech are both important wildlife foods in the fall, beechnuts have about twice as much protein and calories per edible portion as compared to acorns. The American beech provides food and nesting sites for a variety of birds. It was the tree most associated with the passenger pigeon, which fed on its nuts and roosted in its branches in flocks of thousands.



LEAVES

In winter, the eye-catching identifier is the marcescent, copper-colored leaves that have remained attached to its branches, quivering in the slightest breeze.

“When the leaves have forsaken the trees, and the woods are chilly and desolate, there seems nothing to attract one to these bare sentinels of the forest, but Mother Nature has always something to offer to those who love her.”

- Elizabeth H Kirkbride, “A Winters Walk”, February 1907

BARK

The smooth, silvery-gray bark is striking in winter. It is one of the few trees that retain its distinctive, handsome, bark throughout a long life. The diameter on an older tree trunk (beech have been known to live 300 years) may be 13 feet.