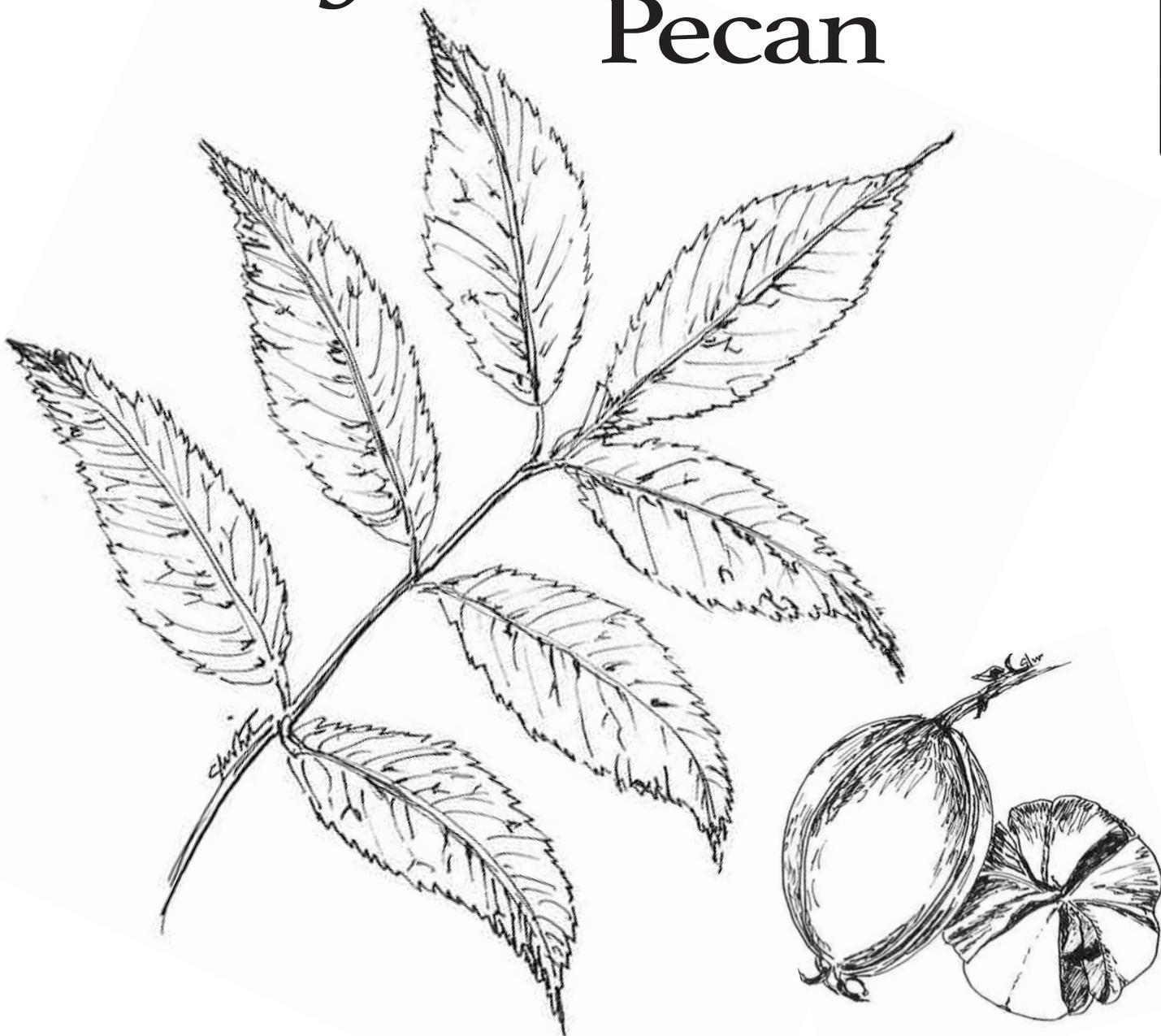


# *Carya illinoensis* Pecan



*Carya illinoensis* is a native North American hickory species and probably best known for the nutritious edible nuts they produce. *Carya illinoensis*, commonly called pecan, is the largest tree in the family of hickories. Pecan trees typically grow 75-100 feet tall with a large, distinctively wide spreading crown (canopy). The lifespan of these behemoths can be up to 300 years! The *Carya* genus includes nearly 20 species. Most are native to North America, including all of those in the Arboretum's living collections. Some species include shagbark (*C. ovata*), shellbark (*C. laciniosa*), mockernut (*C. tomentosa*), and the pignut (*C. glabra*). In the autumn, the intensely yellow gold crowns are a sight to behold.

In addition to their beauty, the female flowers make sweet, edible nuts. Each nut is encased in a thin husk, which splits open into four sections when ripe in the fall. The nuts are favored by squirrels, deer, raccoons, fox, wild turkeys, crows, blue jays, several other bird species and humans. Pecans were the first nuts to be taken to the moon. They were packed aboard Apollo II because they can be stored without refrigeration and are nutritious, high in calories and vitamins, lightweight, and delicious. Now you know why squirrels and chipmunks store caches of nuts for the long winter months.



Pecans were considered a major food source by Indigenous Americans, they fermented the nuts to create a drink known as powcohicora. This is where the word “hickory” originates. The name “pecan” is a word from Indigenous Americans meaning “all nuts requiring a stone to crack.” The pecan tree is said to have the sweetest nuts of all the hickory trees. Although called a nut, it is botanically and technically a drupe, a fruit with a single seed or pit, surrounded by a husk. The outer husk of the pecan starts out green then turns brown when mature. Plums and peaches are also drupes.

Pecans are an important commercial crop in the United States which produces 80% of the world’s pecans. Most pecan groves are located in the Southern United States as pecans only ripen consistently in warm regions. The seeds of the pecan are edible, with a sweet rich, buttery flavor. They can be eaten raw, or used in desserts such as butter pecan ice-cream, or in baking yummy treats such as pecan pie. Here is a recipe from the wonderful Melissa Clark and the NYT: <https://cooking.nytimes.com/recipes/1022734-maple-honey-pecan-pie>