



# HARVESTING AND USE OF BIRCH BARK

BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS – MICHIGAN AGENCY FORESTRY

*Informational Pamphlet – MIBIA-PH-001*



Photo 1: Trees damaged from unsound harvesting methods

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## **Taxonomy:**

Paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*), also called white birch, canoe birch, or silver birch, is one of many native hardwoods in Michigan. Paper birch grows 40 to 70ft tall, 1 to 2 feet in diameter, has ovate, serrated leaves that are 2 to 3 inches long and about 2 inches wide. It produces catkin flowers, which emerge in April to May (about the same time as the leaves). Easily identifiable in the field, Paper birch has white bark that peels away from the trunk exposing a orange inner bark. The native range of paper birch stretches from Alaska to Labrador, south into the northern continental United States. In the east it is found below the 40<sup>th</sup> parallel in the Appalachian Mountains. In MI it is found throughout the U.P. and northern and central L.P.

## **General Biology & Ecology:**

Paper birch is a northern species adapted to cold climates. Paper birch grows on almost any soil and topographic situation. However, it grows best on well-drained sandy loams. Paper birch is most often found in mixed hardwood-conifer forests. However, paper birch is a pioneer species of disturbed areas (e.g. fire, windthrow, and logging) and can form nearly pure stands. Paper birch tends to live to around 60 to 70 years, but can grow survive for up to 200 years. It is an important browse plant for animals. The seeds, buds, and bark are also utilized by a variety of wildlife. Several species of birds including redpoll, pine siskin, chickadee, and ruffed grouse utilize paper birch seeds and buds for food.

## **Traditional Uses of Bark:**

Paper Birch has always been an important plant to native cultures in MI. The bark has been used for baskets, canoes, decorative fans, arm guards, arrow quivers, rattles, and wigwams. Birch bark was also utilized for a variety of traditional medicines (e.g. to treat blood diseases and gastrointestinal aids.).

## **Harvesting of Bark:**

Removal of birch bark, when done correctly, does not kill or greatly harm a tree. The following considerations should be taken into account when harvesting birch bark.

1. Bark does not have to be harvested from live trees. Because of the remarkable preservative properties of birch bark, it can be harvested from dead or fallen trees.
2. Bark should be removed only when it comes off easy, usually in the first part of the growing season (May through June).
3. A small vertical incision through the outer bark (slightly less than 90° to the tree) is all that is needed to peel the bark away.
4. The outer bark is only a ¼ of an inch or less in thickness. Great care should be taken not damage the inner bark. The inner bark (phloem) is the portion of the tree where nutrients and water flow giving the tree life. Interruption of this flow from the removal of inner bark can kill the tree.
5. One should make a small test cut to determine if the bark is suitable for use. Flexibility, thickness, and pliability are all important considerations.

## **Permit Process & Free-Use:**

Harvesting of birch bark on tribal trust lands in MI is permitted for registered members of federally recognized tribes. Interested tribal members can contact the Bureau of Indian Affairs Michigan Agency forester at (906) 353-6692 to request a free-use permit to harvest birch bark. The Agency forester will designate one or more potential gathering locations and issue the interested individual a permit to collect birch bark. However, this bark is intended for personal or cultural use and harvested products cannot be sold or exchanged for money, goods, or services. Also, birch trees are not to be cut or damaged by the individual and sound harvesting methods will be enforced.

## **Resources:**

Burns, R.M. and Honkala, M.B. (1990) *Silvics of North America, Volume 2, Hardwoods*. USDA Forest Service. Agricultural Handbook 654. Washington, D.C.

Lynch, B. (1997) *Ecology, Silviculture, and Status of Paper Birch (wiigwass) in the 1837 and 1842 Ceded Territories*. Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission. Project Report 97-01. Odanah, WI.

Meeker, J.E., Elias, J.E., and Heim, J.A. (1993) *Plants Used by the Great Lakes Ojibwa*. Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission. Odanah, WI.

[www.extension.umn.edu/specializations/enironment/components/birchbark1.html](http://www.extension.umn.edu/specializations/enironment/components/birchbark1.html)

[www.nativetech.org](http://www.nativetech.org)