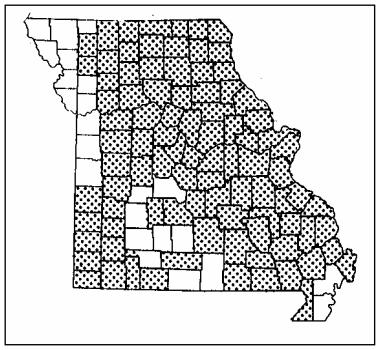
River Birch

Betula nigra L.

River birch is the only native birch to Missouri and is sometimes called red birch, black birch, or water birch. It prefers rich, deep and most soils along rivers and streams and is even found on gravel bars in the river. It is often associated with sycamore, willow, red and silver maple, and cottonwood. It grows naturally throughout the state except for a few of the western prairie counties and dry upland areas of the southwestern Ozarks.

The bark is reddish brown, separating into large, thin, papery scales on young trees, but becomes thick and dark red-brown with deeply furrowed scales on older trees. The sapwood is whitish, pale yellow or light reddish brown. The heartwood is light brown to tan or reddish brown. The heartwood is light brown to tan or reddish brown. The wood has no distinguishing odor or taste. The heartwood has a characteristic dark or chocolate brown streaking which looks like worms. These streaks are scattered and abundant in some wood, scarce in others. Similar streaks are found in soft maple, but are not nearly so abundant, and the maple wood is usually whiter.

River birch is common in Missouri, but not commercially important. Yellow birch (*B. alleghaniensis*, Britton), a northern cousin, is the birch most often found in lumber yards and as plywood. Overall, river birch is a moderately hard wood, strong and easily machined. It shrinks considerably, but is fairly stable when dry. The wood is diffuse porous and the growth rings are not very distinct without a hand lens.

River birch is found occasionally at sawmills, particularly those which saw bottomland species. The lumber is generally lumped together with soft maple. Birch is an excellent furniture wood; it is used for paneling, boxes, crates, novelties and toys. Not commonly found in home workshops, it is a good wood for furniture projects because it machines, sands and finishes well.

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