January – Shagbark Hickory

With momentum from last year’s successful theme, the Year of the Bird, 2023 has ushered in the Year of the Tree at Awbury Arboretum and I couldn’t be more eager to be back writing more about our natural ecosystem here in Philadelphia. While you take breaks between the bird watching, a skill that hopefully you embraced throughout the last twelve blogs, make sure to stop and be present with the other beings that call that forest, park, meadow, creek side, or backyard home – trees.

Trees are truly one of natures best creations. Collectively, they are lungs for cleaner air, banks for storing carbon, air conditioning for urban neighborhoods, and forest playgrounds for those with unadulterated curiosity. Individually, they are as unique as any human and have been the mythic muse for millennium.

As one of my favorite authors writes in his book *The Overstory,* an ode to the connection between trees and humans, “You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes.”

To simply put it, trees are the coolest.

At Awbury Arboretum, we are proud to be a haven for many of the tree species that are native to this area. After all, it’s in the name. Whenever I tell someone about the special place that is Awbury, I always use the analogy that we act like a zoo for trees. So, without further ado, we turn to our first tree of the year and one which can be found on our own grounds: the Shagbark Hickory (*Carya ovata*).

The Shagbark Hickory is a native, deciduous (meaning its leaves fall off in the winter) tree located in the Eastern and Midwestern United States and a member of the Walnut and Hickory families. Found mostly in dry uplands or moist valleys, the range of this tree can be versatile, but it is found most commonly among other hickories and oaks. They can withstand a range of temperatures, especially since they have found refuge in climates ranging from bitter Michigan winters to humid southern Appalachian summers. Peak growing conditions though are in moist soil and humid climates.

In those prime conditions, this tree can reach heights of over 100 feet and can expand to widths of about 40 feet. They are currently a very stable species, and threats to their conservation are low. These trees luckily have a natural immunity to many of the blights that plague other species, but some insects do nibble at their bark throughout the summer.

The defining attribute of the Shagbark Hickory is what its name suggests. A young tree’s bark is striated (having shallow vertical grooves of a different color) and not too different from other similar species. However, as the tree develops, its bark begins to buckle and large ridges appear that divide the bark from the underlying trunk. Those ridges then begin to pull away at their ends, which results in “shaggy” bark that peels right off the tree.

While it may look a little untidy, that very function does prove useful for some critters like Indiana bats, who make their homes in the cozy crevices that are left behind. In the same breath, these winter months make it a bit harder to identify a tree without its leaves. If you are wandering about in a forest this month, look for that shedding bark!

Another way to identify the Shagbark Hickory is to look for its hickory nuts. Since it is a member of the Walnut family and related to the Pecan, it produces delicious nuts that have been often coined the truffle of tree nuts. Every fall, the tree will drop hundreds of hard, black husks that split open along four ribs to reveal an inner shell that can be pried out and broken open. Typically, this process takes quite a bit of patience – hammers are needed to break open the shell and fine tools are often used to access the meat inside. Once the hard work is done, a little toasting gives the hickory nut its historically sought-after smoky flavor and perfect crunch. Perfect for a winter’s day!

Sources:

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