

Shagbark: Venerable brethren of oak

Jack Knight weighs in on the other half of our oak-hickory forests

European explorers who came upon the Algonquins found them living in what appeared to be nut orchards of a strange tree unlike any they had ever seen. It had huge plates of peeling bark and large compound leaves like a tropical plant.

They made a dye from the inner bark and boiled the nuts into a butter that was a staple food and item of trade. They called it pawcohiccora. We shortened the name to hickory (*Carya ovata*), and the tree that was once central to tribal life is no less important to us as the venerable brethren of oak in our oak-hickory forests.

Shagbark hickory shares with oak its several hundred years of longevity and a hard, nutritious mast that is important food for wildlife. The tree is at home in fire-based oak savannas, as well as in bottomland and moist forests. Essential to the web of life in our eastern hardwood forests, the leaves of this keystone species add calcium to the soil, providing balance to the acidic foliage of oaks. The bark provides favorite roosting places for bats that feed on the myriad of moths that attack the tree. The hard cocoons of hickory gall insects are favored by squirrels who know where the main course is coming from.

Shagbark grows to 120 feet, after first putting down an enormous taproot, which reaches as far as 4 feet before the seedling is a foot tall. The male catkins and female flowers pollinate best in groves. The trees hybridize easily, crossing with other hickories and pecans.

Shagbark's slow growth complicates propagation; however, it's likely to be included in more and more of our tree-planting plans both as seedlings and in direct seeding. That's because of the emerald ash borer problem in ash and the white-tailed deer in oak.

In commerce. A shagbark revival would certainly add to the health and diversity of our forests. Shagbark wood also makes beautiful cabinets, flooring and paneling. Woodworkers prefer shagbark's softer cousins such as bitternut hickory and pecan, which aren't so hard on their equipment. But a market for shagbark saw logs still exists. The strength of shagbark makes it the wood of choice for axe handles and other tools. Historically it was the wood de jour for wagon wheels, carts, looms, skis and sleds. And nothing beats hickory as a smoking wood and for making charcoal.

Lost in history are the groomed stands of the Algonquin

and the lessons being taught to the tune of the hickory stick in one-room schools. But the future for shagbark looks bright, with every nut we put in the mix of direct seedings, and with every deep narrow hole we set a seedling in. No second cousin or younger brother of the mighty oak, the shagbark will hold its own, standing side by side, century for century, nut for nut.

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Barking up the right tree: "The shagbark is essential to the web of life in our eastern hardwood forests." ~ Jack Knight.