

Learning about Hackberry

Celtis laevigata

Hackberry is a tree native to Louisiana. It is also known by the name “Sugarberry Tree”. Hackberry is found growing in both wet and dry coastal habitats. It can be found growing at the edge of salt water marshes and fresh water wetlands. It is a very tough tree that is tolerant of moderate salt spray as well as poor, wet soils and shade. It can even stand periodic short term salt water flooding. It is an excellent source of food for wildlife. *Celtis* is a name given by Pliny to some plants with sweet berries; *laevigata* means smooth and probably refers to the leaves.



Characteristics. Hackberry is a small to medium size deciduous tree, usually less than 60 feet tall. Hackberry trees have a smooth, gray bark with scattered, corky warts. It has alternate, simple leaves that are 2-4 inches long with teeth along the margin. Leaves have long pointed tips and three prominent veins on the bottom of the leaf that arises from the petiole. The leaf stem is slightly hairy and grooved. The Bark is grayish brown and has warts.



Fruit. The fruit is orange-red to blue-black in color and is called a *drupe*, which is a fleshy fruit that has a single hard stone that encloses a seed. Examples of drupes include peaches, cherries, and olives. The hackberry drupe resembles an oblong cherry that is ¼ - ½ “ in diameter on a long slender stem. Tiny flowers appear as the leaves are just unfolding in March. The fruit matures in autumn.

Geographic Range. The hackberry is native to the southeastern United States. It ranges along the Gulf and Atlantic coasts of the United States, northward to the south coast of Lake Erie, and southward into northeastern Mexico. It is widely distributed in Louisiana.



Additional Information.

- The fruit of the hackberry is an important food for birds. Bluebirds, cardinals, catbirds, cedar waxwings, flickers, mockingbirds, red-bellied woodpeckers, robins, sapsuckers, thrashers, titmice, towhees and many others rely on the fruit of this tree during the autumn season.
- The hackberry is also a source of food for larval butterflies and for nectar for adult butterflies. Some of the butterfly larvae that rely on this tree for food include the Hackberry Emperor, Mourning Clock, Question Mark, Snout, and Tawny Emperor.
- The hackberry is tolerant of salt spray and poor, wet soils. It can also tolerate periodic salt water flooding of its roots. These characteristics make it a great tree for our Gulf Coast wetlands.
- Hackberry flowers when the leaves first appear in the spring, from March to May. Fruit first appears on the tree in July and August. The fruit ripens in October and will stay on the tree through midwinter. Seeds can be collected then stratify (place in moist peat moss in the refrigerator at 41° F) for 60-90 days, then planted.

Images from: Oklahoma Biological Survey. <http://www.biosurvey.ou.edu/shrub/cela.htm>. February 18, 2002.

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