
Wildflower Spot – March 2017
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

AMERICAN BEECH

Fagus grandifolia

By Helen Hamilton, *Past-president of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

American beech is one of the easiest trees to recognize in the winter, with slender, sharp-pointed cigar-shaped buds at the tips of somewhat zigzag branches. Also distinctive are the dark green leaves which are edged with even, sharp teeth and pointed at the tips. From the midrib, veins extend to the edge of the leaf in straight, parallel rows.

Turning yellow and tan in the fall, many faded leaves persist on the lower branches until spring. In April, yellow-green flowers appear with the leaves in small, drooping clusters on male trees; the female flowers are separate and arise directly from the young stems. The fruit is an angular, spiky husk with an edible “beechnut.”

American beech is a very large tree, growing to 60-75 feet with a trunk diameter of 2-3 feet. Specimens in virgin forests were more than 100 feet tall with trunk diameters up to 4 feet. Few other large trees have smooth gray bark, often carved with initials and dates. With the combination of smooth bark, pointed buds, and prickly fruits, American beech can easily be identified in all seasons.

This tree prefers moist rich soils of uplands and well-drained lowlands but will grow in a variety of situations. American beech ranges from southern Ontario, south to Florida, west to Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas, and is common in all counties of Virginia.

The colonists recognized this tree, who already knew the famous, closely related European Beech. The words “beech” and “book” come from the same root, because ancient Saxons and Germans wrote on pieces of beech board. The wood has been used for cheap furniture and fuel, and the tree is planted widely for ornament.

Although the kernels of beechnuts are small, they are sweet, edible, and nutritious, and are consumed in quantities by wildlife, especially squirrels, raccoons, ruffed grouse and wild turkey. ❖



Photo: American beech (*Fagus grandifolia*) taken by Phillip Merritt
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