



Alabama's *TREASURED* Forests
513 Madison Avenue
P.O. Box 302550
Montgomery, Alabama 36130-2550

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Eastern Hophornbeam

(*Ostrya virginiana*)

By Fred Nation, Environmental Services, Baldwin County

Eastern hophornbeam is a small-to-medium size deciduous hardwood tree in the birch family. It is frequently seen throughout Alabama and in the understory of forests in a huge area from eastern Canada, south to Florida, west to Texas and northern Mexico. It often reaches 30 feet in height, with a straight trunk, up to 10 or 12 inches in diameter. The crown is conical or irregular, sometimes with persistent small branches nearly to the ground.

The leaves are oblong or elliptical, to about 5 inches long, with rounded, sometimes unequal bases and sharply pointed tips. The margins are singly or doubly serrate. The bark is brown, with a reddish cast, finely divided into long narrow plates that give it a shaggy or shredded appearance. The flowers of hophornbeam are unisexual (monoecious), with the female flowers developing interesting-looking clusters of nutlets in papery "sacks" that resemble hops – the flowers of an unrelated northern European vine used to flavor beer.

Like most of our native trees, hophornbeam has several interesting common

names, including "hardhack" and "leverwood," and it is one of several plants that are called "ironwood." The genus name, *Ostrya*, is from a Greek word that means "bone-like," in reference to the hard



Photos by Fred Nation

wood. American hornbeam, *Carpinus caroliniana* is a closely-related tree in the same family and it is also often called "ironwood." The similar wood is heavy, hard, and durable, and both species have been used for the same purposes, such as tools and tool handles, levers, geared wheels, and golf club heads. They take a fine polish, and their density and resistance to compression make both woods good choices for longbows.

The heartwood of *Ostrya* is quite bitter tasting. Called the "bitter principal," historically this astringency was thought by herbalists to be an effective treatment for fevers, including "intermittent fever" which we know today as malaria. The usual treatment was the powdered or chipped heartwood of hophornbeam, boiled and taken as a medicinal tea called a "decoction."

Hophornbeam provides valuable nesting shelter and forage for a variety of wildlife species. The leaves are larval hosts for moths, including the large walnut sphinx moth. Many songbirds, such as robins, finches, cardinals and catbirds feed on the ripe nutlets, and they are a preferred winter forage for ruffed grouse and wild turkeys.

Because it is a trouble-free understory tree that is not particular about the site, hophornbeam is becoming more popular and more readily available from growers. The small stature, attractive fruits, and distinctive shaggy bark all make it a good choice for home landscapes, parks, and street plantings.

The largest *Ostrya virginiana* known to exist in Alabama is 37 inches in circumference, 63 feet tall, with a crownspread of 42 feet. This giant hophornbeam makes its home in DeKalb County. 🌳

