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River birch (*Betula nigra*)

Nebraska Forest Service

River birch (*Betula nigra*) has become a very popular landscape tree in Nebraska. It is similar to the white birch but without the insect and borer problems and it is used to the heat of summer since it is a more southerly variety of birch. It grows best along rivers and streams in its native habitat but it does very well as a landscape tree or as a visual barrier planted in a row. River birch is native to the Atlantic coastal states, southern states, the lower Midwest, eastern Great Plains, and lower Mississippi River valley. It is not native to Nebraska. As a member of the Birch Family, it is related to the Alders, Hornbeams, Filberts, and Hophornbeams, in addition to other Birches.



River birch is a fast growing tree. Its growth habit is somewhat unusual in that the tree continues to grow through a good portion of the summer. When other trees have stopped their growth, the river birch just keeps on going. The leaves are lustrous green and flutter in the wind. The bark is gray to golden brown, even orange in color and exfoliates like most birches do. In the fall the leaves turns a deep gold. River birch can be grown as a single stem tree or as a clump.



River birch likes a moist, rich soil but it will also do relatively well on lesser sites. Chlorosis (yellowing of leaves) is a problem if the tree is planted on soils that are very compacted and have a high pH value. It is sometimes a difficult tree to get established and it is not uncommon for the tree to struggle for a couple of years before it begins to put on more growth. It is best to plant smaller nursery stock.

River birch flowers in the spring. The male flowers are catkins and are formed in the summer and fall and remain on the tree through the winter adding to its visual interest. When spring arrives the male flowers expand and bloom. Female flowers, located on the same tree, resemble a small pinecone when they mature. Birds (especially goldfinch) enjoy the mature seed in the fall.

River birch is an excellent tree for Nebraska. It provides both summer and winter beauty.