

## Knowing Our Natives: Paper Birch



It can be a challenge to remain resilient during the darkest and coldest times of the year. For some encouragement, look no further than one of mankind's oldest plant friends, the paper birch, a native to cold northern forests across the continent. Paper birch (*Betula papyrifera*), also known as white birch, silver birch, canoe birch, and *wigwaasaatig* in Anishinaabemowin, has stunning white peeling bark and is quickly forms stands in disturbed areas, rehabilitating the landscape and creating beauty from destruction.

Many indigenous cultures have legends about birch trees. The Ojibwe tell of Nanaboozhoo, the trickster, who transformed into a rabbit to steal fire from a thunderbird. When the thunderbird chased Nanaboozhoo and threw lightning at him, he cried out for help. The paper birch heard and invited him to take shelter under its branches. The thunderbird struck the tree protecting the rabbit, scaring its bark, forever leaving it with black burn marks.

The bark's white color is caused by *betulin*, an antimicrobial compound that shields the tree from sunscald, when warmth of the sun melts frozen bark, causing cracks. The *betulin* also waterproofs the bark which resulted in its heavy use to roof wigwams, weave baskets, and construct food storage containers. Notably, it has been used for the outer hull on canoes like those belonging to the Ojibwe, sewn together with spruce roots, and sealed shut with balsam fir pitch.

Besides the bark, birch trees have a wide variety of uses. The lumber is used for veneer and pulp, as well as for specialty items including popsicle sticks and broom handles. The nutritious leaf litter it drops helps regenerate soil where there's been a fire or other disturbance. The watery sap can be boiled into syrup, dried into sugar, or distilled into wine or beer. It's long been admired in poetry, making appearances in works by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Robert Frost.

There are many lessons to be learned from the paper birch, especially at the start of a new year. A certain stick-to-itiveness, tolerance to harsh environments, and the ability to give to others are all wonderful to keep in mind when making resolutions, but perhaps its most important lesson is in treasuring history whilst working towards a bright future, as the birch does in the wake of ruin.

