

Celtis laevigata (Sugar Hackberry) Elm Family (Ulmaceae)

Introduction:

Sugar hackberry is used commonly as a shade tree because it is both handsome and tolerant of urban stresses. It has smooth gray bark that may become somewhat corky with age. Although this native of the southeast U.S. thrives in the wild along stream banks and river flood plains, it adapts well to dry conditions. Its abundant berries attract birds and squirrels.

Culture:

Sugar hackberry is a good street tree due to its drought tolerance. Given adequate room to spread, it is also an excellent shade tree for home landscapes and parks.

It is a tough tree that withstands urban stress, low temperatures and dry soils. Sugar hackberry thrives in moist soils, especially the clay soils of river flood plains and streams where it is native.

Sugar hackberry can be a short-lived tree. Its weak wood breaks under the stresses of snow, ice and wind. Wildlife, particularly birds and squirrels, enjoy and seek out hackberry's nutritious berries. However, these abundant berries can develop abundant seedlings that can be a weed pest. Berries exude a sweet, sticky substance in fall that attracts mealy bugs who in turn secrete "honeydew," a relatively harmless sugary excretion, on the tree. The tree may become infested with tiny insects called psyllids that cause harmless protrusions on the leaves called hackberry galls. Sugar hackberry is resistant to *Verticillium* wilt. It is susceptible to "witch's broom" that can disfigure the branches, but does not seriously affect the health of the tree.

Additional information:

The sugar hackberry genus name, *Celtis*, is the Greek name for tree. The species name, *laevigata*, means "smooth," referring to the smooth leaves. The champion sugar hackberry tree is 148 feet tall and is in South Carolina.

The berries of this species were used as a food seasoning by native Americans and early settlers. The berry floats in water and is waterborne in nature where the tree grows along streams and on river plains.

Sugar hackberry wood is heavy but soft and weak. It is light yellow with an attractive pattern that polishes well but has a limited use due to its lack of strength.



Botanical Characteristics:

Native habitat - Southeast U.S. including western Kentucky.

Growth habit - This large tree has a short, straight trunk with a broad crown.

Tree size - This species is a slow to moderate growing tree and reaches 60 to 80 feet at maturity, with a spread of 40 feet.

Flower and fruit - Male, female and bisexual flowers are borne on the same plant. All are small, green and without petals. Fruit is an edible, pea-sized blue-black berry with a thin flesh layer.

Leaf - The smooth dark-green leaves are long (4 inches) and do not have distinctly attractive fall color.

Hardiness - Winter hardy to USDA zone 5.