The Appalachian VOICE

A publication of Appalachian Voices

The virtues of the hickory tree

The Appalachian Voice | February 1, 2007 | 1 Comment

By R. Kelly Coffey

images/voice_uploads/nn.p23.hickory.gif">When European settlers arrived in America, they found an abundant nut tree unknown in the Old World. Native Americans had a curious practice of pounding the nuts and tossing them into boiling water. The heat separated a cream-colored oily substance from the nuts, which was skimmed off and stored as a pasty material the Indians called “pawcohiccora” in the Algonquin tongue. Indians used pawcohiccora in ways similar to butter; i.e. as a spread and an ingredient in corn cakes and other dishes. English-speaking settlers soon shortened the Indian word to “hickory,” broadened its meaning to the name for the tree itself, and referred to the creamy nut extract as “hickory milk.” This oily substance became economically valuable in colonial trade; one quart of hickory milk, for example, could be exchanged for 19 pounds of pork.

Mixed nuts

The hickory is one of the most varied, useful, and economically significant trees in the forest. It is often associated with our pioneer past, and retains its appeal even in modern times. Hickory species belong to the walnut family, which includes pecans and other nut-bearing trees. Numerous hickory species exist throughout eastern North America, including the Appalachians. The species naturally hybridize though, making species identification a challenge. Bitternut hickory (Carya cordiformis) is widely distributed but not widely consumed because of its distasteful kernels. Pignut hickory (Carya glabra) is especially common in the southern Appalachians, its name indicating the historical consumers of its sweet nuts. Several hickory species bear sweet nuts that are suitable for consumption by people, although hickories are a relatively minor segment of the overall nut market. However, hickory nuts are a major food source for many wild animals, from mice to bears. Squirrels in particular depend on hickory for up to 25% of their diet.

Practically all hickories produce durable, resistant wood that long ago become proverbial- e.g. “tough as hickory.” Andrew Jackson’s warrior reputation, for example, earned him the nickname “Old Hickory.” Pignut is especially suited to withstand extreme vibrations, making it sought after in the past for wagon wheels and textile looms. The tree was also called broom hickory for another of its uses.

The most distinctive species is the shagbark hickory (Carya ovata) whose peeling-paint appearance makes it easy to identify even in winter. The shingle-like bark forms mini-shelters that occasionally harbor bats. Though the ragged outer bark is of little human use, early settlers found that the inner bark renders a yellow dye. The pignut and shagbark

species are the most significant commercial hickories for wood. A variety of shagbark called Carolina hickory (var. australis), characterized by smaller leaflets and nuts, is found only in the southern Appalachians. Most hickories are attractive in landscaped settings, especially the shagbark with its textured trunk. But hickories are seldom used as ornamental plantings, possibly because they are slow-growing.

Even better when burned

Perhaps the most familiar use of hickory, even in modern times, is for smoking meat. Although opinions vary as to the best species, mockernut hickory (Carya tomentosa) is frequently mentioned as the choice wood for smoking hams. The mockernut, so named because the small kernels are encased in disproportionately large husks, can reach an age up to 500 years (one of the longest-lived hickories) though almost all hickories can survive several hundred years, with bitternut being the shortest-lived at 200 years. Intentionally planting a hickory tree in order to harvest the nuts is definitely an exercise in patience, and perhaps only for posterity, as the trees do not begin bearing nuts for at least 20 years; with some not bearing significant crops for 30-40 years.

Hickory firewood is legendary for producing a long burn, maximum heat, and minimum ash. Colonial naturalist Mark Catesby observed, “For the fire no wood in the northern parts of America is in so much request.” A cord generates heat equivalent to 175 gallons of fuel oil, or a little over a ton of coal. Hickory also burns with an exceptional luminous flame, an added appeal in pre-electric days.

The list of hickory virtues goes on and on. The high calcium content of its foliage improves the nutrient content of soil where it grows. In the past, the wood was used as barrel hoops, wicker chair bottoms, and baskets; oil from the nuts

was suitable as a fuel for lamps (a good use for bitternut), and Indians processed parts of the tree into various medicinal remedies. The hardy wood is in demand for tool handles, furniture, flooring, and items requiring shock-resistance such as baseball bats and other sports equipment. Even its sap can be tapped to produce a sweet syrup like maple! Misbehaving children in Appalachia are often threatened with “a dose of hickory tea,” and quickly discover that it is not a medication or a refreshing drink, but a switching with a hickory limb (the fact that it is hickory tea and not a softer wood apparently making the threat more menacing).

The American chestnut is frequently praised as the premier Appalachian tree because of its many uses, and rightfully so. But hickory certainly ranks a close second. Considering all its merits, its remarkable economic history, and its few- if any-limitations, the hickory would be a strong candidate for the all-around perfect Appalachian tree.

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Lisa • 3 years ago

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last year. Can you help?
Lisa Abell

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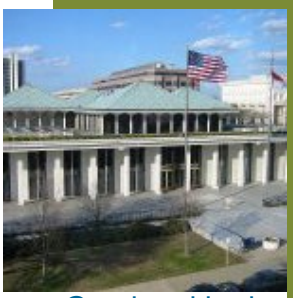

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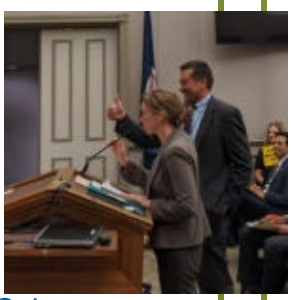

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589 West King Street, Boone, N.C.