

# School-to-Nature



## Ironwood Tree

There are many species of Ironwood trees; the variety on Conservancy lands is called the American Hop-hornbeam. This is an “understory tree” growing below the larger trees, especially oaks. Ironwoods have a pyramid shape as seen in the photo above, have very hard wood (hence the name) and are slow-growing. Mature trees are 20-50 feet tall with trunks reaching about 1 foot in diameter. Leaves are 2-5” long and 1-3” wide. It thrives in sun or shade. Identification note: the bark of the Ironwood has strong “shaggy” vertical lines. Some mistake it for Shagbark Hickory; but the bark lines of Ironwood are much narrower.

The female trees bloom with a green “catkin,” fertilized by the wind from the catkins of a male tree, which look a lot like hops (see the top right photo). This produces reddish-brown seeds that are eaten by Bobwhites, Pheasants, Grouse, deer and rabbits. The female catkin & seeds are in the photo at the right.



Ironwood’s wood is used for tool handles, small wood items, fence posts, mallets and as fuel. While the flowers of some Ironwood species have medicinal uses, the Hop-hornbeam catkins do not. The Potawatomi Indians made an infusion of Hop-Hornbeam Ironwood bark to treat diarrhea, and they used the heartwood in medicine for hemorrhages. Although this Ironwood variety would make a pretty street tree, it is intolerant of salt and of heavy air pollution.

June 2022 BH / DL

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