Shagbark Hickory – *Carya ovata*  

**Family:** **Juglandaceae**  

by Russ Cohen

Shagbark hickory (*Carya ovata*) trees are a familiar sight along rural roads and field edges over much of New England, as well as further south and west. They are recognizable year-round by their tell-tale bark. Although other trees such as silver maple (*Acer saccharinum*) have shaggy bark, *C. ovata’s* is the most dramatic. Pieces of bark typically peel off in vertical strips over a foot long, pulling away from the trunk up to several inches at each end. The bark of a young shagbark hickory, however, is light gray and smooth; the shagginess develops as the trunk exceeds four to five inches in diameter.

Shagbark hickory’s compound leaves have five leaflets, the two inner ones noticeably smaller than the outer three. They are typically over 60 feet tall, with trunks a foot or more in diameter. Although several other species of smoother-barked hickories, such as the pignut (*Carya glabra*) grow in this region, I tend to ignore them. Their nuts tend to be smaller and less reliably tasty than those of the shagbark. In addition, trees of the other hickory species tend to be less conspicuous than *C. ovata*.

In addition to the tree’s distinctive peeling bark (under which bats are known to roost), it has attractive, deep-yellow fall foliage; and its wood is useful for tool handles, heating, and smoking. But *Carya ovata’s* most appealing trait is the deliciousness of its nuts. Some people, including me, believe that no tastier nut is produced by a native species of this, or perhaps any, region. To me, shagbark hickory nuts taste like store-bought walnuts lightly sprayed with maple syrup. They are good eaten raw right out of the shell, but even better when lightly toasted or incorporated into baked goods. Indeed, their fine flavor makes them a superior substitute for walnuts or pecans in almost any recipe. People who taste my maple-hickory nut pie (the recipe is in my book, *Wild Plants I Have Known…and Eaten*) prefer it to pecan pie, as its flavor is richer and less cloying.

While not hard to grow *Carya ovata* from seed, it takes 20 years or more for a seed-grown tree to produce good-sized nut crops. So, while you are waiting, you may want to gather nuts from existing shagbark hickories in Rhode Island, rural Connecticut (Windham and New London Counties), or Massachusetts (Bristol, Norfolk or Worcester Counties).

Shagbark hickory nuts typically ripen in this region over four to six weeks, from mid-September into late October. The quantity and quality of hickory nuts can vary considerably from tree to tree and from year to year, as the trees tend to produce large nut crops on a two-to-three-year cycle.

The nut meats are enclosed in a smooth, light tan, inch-long shell covered by a spherical, shiny-green, four-parted husk. The nuts usually fall when they are ripe, so there’s no need to pick them from the tree. The husk typically splits away from the shell or is easily pulled off by hand.

Hickory nuts were (and, in some cases, still are) a very popular food of Native Americans. European botanists of the 17th and 18th centuries observed them crushing the shells with stones, and putting nut meats, shells and all, into mortars, where they would be mixed and pounded with water and then boiled to produce a milky soup or gruel-like substance called “powcohickora” (hence the derivation of the word “hickory”).

**Propagation**

The first step to propagating shagbark hickory from seed is to gather some nuts and plant them outdoors soon after collection before they dry out and lose their viability. Or store nuts in a sealed plastic bag to retain mois-
Cultivation Notes

Sow the nuts outdoors the following spring. If you have not yet determined a permanent location for your shagbark trees, plant them in deep pots. Shagbarks spend most of their energy the first few years developing a long taproot; for every inch the plant grows above ground, the root grows three inches downward. I grow my *Carya ovata* trees in 14 inch-deep Treepots (available from Stuewe and Sons https://www.stuewe.com/products/treepots.php), and I am not sure that even they are deep enough for the taproot.

Whether you sow the nuts outside, right where you want the trees to grow, or sow them in pots, plant them about three-quarters to one inch below the surface of the soil or growing medium. You must also protect the nuts from being dug up by squirrels, chipmunks, and other wildlife. I use half-inch-mesh metal hardware cloth, jamming it firmly into the top of each pot, or pinning it down over the nut planted in situ with fabric pegs. When the nut sprouts in the spring, the seedling can easily grow through the mesh.

In choosing a location, remember that hickory trees bear larger crops in full sun. And avoid rocky sites because the hickory’s long tap root needs deep soil. While *C. ovata* trees are monocious and self-fertile, planting two or more trees close to each other helps ensure good pollination and nut production.

Last but not least: planting a shagbark hickory is the epitome of delayed gratification. I will never see nuts produced from many of the hickory trees I propagate and plant. But Rhode Island, and the greater ecoregion, including wildlife and humans, will reap the benefits of more shagbarks in the landscape. I bear in mind the wise adage attributed to the Chinese: “The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago. The second best time is now.”

Author biography

Russ Cohen has spent most of his life communing with nature by nibbling on it. He has led walks and taught courses on wild edibles throughout the Northeast since 1974. In addition, since retiring from the Massachusetts Department of Fish and Game, Russ has set up a small nursery in Weston, MA, where he grows plants from seed. He is partnering with public and non-profit groups to plant these species on a variety of properties. You may read more about these many projects on his website, http://users.rcn.com/eatwild/bio.htm.

Other Sources


