Key Characteristics

**PRODUCT**
- There are 18 species of the birch genus *Betula* in North America, with five species growing in Minnesota.
- Look for paper birch in northeastern Minnesota.

**HARVEST**
- Bark is best harvested between late June and early July when trees are actively growing.

**SOCIO-ECONOMIC**
- Ojibwe birch bark canoes are displayed at the Fond du Lac Cultural Center and Museum in Cloquet, MN, and at the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C.

**REGULATORY**
- There is no uniform set of regulations regarding the harvesting of bark.

**CAUTIONS**
- Before harvesting bark, consider its use today as well as its potential future use. Minnesota’s once plentiful “canoe” trees are now scarce.

**Location**

**DISTRIBUTION**
There are 18 species of the birch genus *Betula* in North America. Five species grow in Minnesota, including yellow birch, heart-leaved birch, river birch, paper birch and bog birch (bog birch is a shrub).

**HABITAT**
Paper birch trees have the ability to grow in a wide range of soil conditions, such as sandy, rocky or loamy soils, and organic peat. Birch may be found growing in stands, but it is commonly mixed with other tree species. It prefers full sun and is an early-successional species, readily occupying land disturbed by wind events, forest fires or logging.

**Identification**

**DESCRIPTION**
Paper birch are deciduous trees with single or multiple stems with a narrow crown. As young trees, paper birch have the ability to grow rapidly and display a reddish-brown colored bark. As trees mature, the bark transitions to a chalky white color when the trees are approximately 15 to 20 years old. In Minnesota, mature trees stand 60 to 70 feet tall.

Leaves of the paper birch are oval shaped with doubly serrated margins that are arranged alternately along the branches. Paper birch have shallow rooting systems, leaving them prone to drought.
Betulin: A chemical substance that appears in powdery form in the bark of birch trees. It has been extracted from bark and used in some medications.

Dieback: The progressive dying from the extremity of any part of a plant, in this case usually the top of the tree or the 'crown'. Dieback may or may not result in the death of the entire tree.

REFERENCES


(Continued)
optimize harvest. Harvesting tips include:

- Get permission prior to harvesting, and be sure you know your location.
- Ask an experienced harvester to assist you if you have no experience harvesting bark.
- Removing birch bark may kill the tree, making best harvesting practices a must.
- Consider the location of harvest area and distance to road both for aesthetics and because carrying bark out of the woods requires effort.
- Refrain from indiscriminate harvesting. DO NOT remove birch bark in parks, wayside rests or along roadsides.

**CAUTION**
Removing the bark may affect the tree’s lumber quality. Therefore, if the trees are being grown for paneling or veneer, it is important to coordinate removing bark with the timing of the timber harvest.

**Handling**

**STORAGE**
Many birch bark harvesters store bark for extended periods of time by flattening sheets using a sheet of plywood and weights. The bark may be kept outside in a cool, dry space like a shed or garage. Other harvesters prefer to leave the bark outdoors, allowing it to absorb moisture from the ground. Bark can be kept for years if stored in a dry place out of direct sunlight.

**Markets**
There is strong interest in using birch bark for crafts, artistry and architectural design. Additionally, there is a strong cultural interest in bark. The internet and local farmers markets and craft shows represent potential market outlets for raw and finished products. Advertising products in local newspapers may also be effective.

**Regulations**
There is no uniform set of regulations regarding the harvesting of bark. It is important to respect the wishes and requirements of landowners. Some public land agencies require permits prior to harvesting. Others prefer harvesters to connect directly with loggers. It is very important to obtain permission prior to harvesting and to follow all applicable rules. If properly coordinated, bark can be harvested from living trees before or after they are scheduled for final harvest.

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**Mazinibaganjigan**

Mazinibaganjigan (plural: mazinibaganjiganan) is an ancient folk art made by the Ojibwe (Anishinaabe), Cree and other Algonquian peoples who use birch bark, by biting down on small pieces of birch bark to form intricate designs.


[Contemporary bark biting by Kelly Church. Photo taken from Wikipedia.org.]