

Kentucky Champion Tree Program



Photo courtesy: Diana Olszowy

Sugarberry - The Other Warty-Barked Tree

by Diana Olszowy

Even though sugarberry is native to Kentucky, it is not a frequently recognized tree. This may be due to the fact that it is often mistaken for its cousin the common hackberry, which it closely resembles. Both the sugarberry and the hackberry have gray bark with numerous warty ridges, though the sugarberry usually displays much less of this characteristic. Both produce an abundant supply of fleshy, dark red to black berries which attract birds and squirrels and, unfortunately, many insects. Mealy bugs and aphids covet the juice from the berries and produce a sticky, sugary excretion called “honeydew,” which can harm your car’s finish.

Hackberry is located in all 50 states, and the sugarberry is more commonly found in the central to southern regions of the United States from Virginia to Florida and from Texas to central Illinois. In the southern states, sugarberry is commonly referred to as “sugar hackberry” and, since sugarberry lacks the winter-hardiness of hackberry, it is also referred to as southern hackberry. Both hackberry and sugarberry thrive in a variety of sites, but the sugarberry adapts well to dry and droughty conditions. Its ability to tolerate salt makes it an excellent street and park tree for use in urban areas. Since both are part of the elm family, their wood is



The bark of sugarberry (left) and hackberry (right) are similar but the sugarberry has many fewer warty ridges than hackberry.

Photos courtesy: Sugarberry - Stephen J. Baskauf, <http://bioimages.vanderbilt.edu/> - Hackberry - Joseph O'Brien, USDA Forest Service, Bugwood.org

marketed as such, and the uses include plywood, athletic equipment, and some furniture.

Sugarberries average two to three feet in diameter and 60 to 80 feet in height. Their crown is usually as wide as they are tall. Our state champion sugarberry is no exception.

The Fayette County champ is 70 feet tall and has a crown spread of 70 feet, but its diameter is nearly seven times larger than the average sugarberry. Our champ has a circumference of just over 166 inches—that’s nearly 14 feet around! This enormous tree grows beside a major roadway in Fayette County, but it does not stand out due to the large quantity of other enormous specimens of oak, ash, and maple that grow along the same roadway. Drive slowly and look for the sugarberry because it is an admirable species that deserves a second look.

About the Author:

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Photo courtesy: Stephen J. Baskauf, <http://bioimages.vanderbilt.edu/>



The leaves of sugarberry are 2 to 5 inches long and 1 to 2 inches wide and gradually taper to a point that is often curved.