

Oahe Hackberry – Our Common “Corky” Tree

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The common hackberry, *Celtis occidentalis*, is a common tree, probably more so than most are aware of. In suburban settings, volunteer hackberry trees often are “deposited” by birds along fences, within shrubs, and behind buildings and can sometimes be unnoticed until they get 6' or taller. Obviously they don't need much for care to get past the sapling stage. These are adaptable, drought and alkaline tolerant, and good for windy, dry areas.



A variant of the common hackberry, the Oahe hackberry, not only shares its scientific name but all of the toughness characteristics as well. Collected as seed from wild-growing native trees near Gettysburg in 1937, the Oahe hackberry have higher early survival rates and faster growth rates than the common hackberry, often able to add at least 1.5' of height annually. They have adapted very well to an area that encompasses all of North Dakota, most of South Dakota, the western half of Minnesota, and small eastern portions of Wyoming and Montana.

Several things about the Oahe hackberry are pretty unique to the tree. Their bark is very interesting, described as a gray, corky, ridged trunk. Even without leaves hackberry trees are very easy to identify just by looking for their corky trunks. Also unique is their response to eggs laid on the undersides of their leaves by an insect called a psyllid (pronounced, sill-ids). The tree's response is to grow a small bump, or gall, around the immediate egg laying area where the young psyllid feeds throughout the summer. The common name of this insect is . . . wait for it, . . . the hackberry nipple gall maker.

These galls make the leaves unsightly to some homeowners. The trees themselves do not appear to suffer from an infestation, and the psyllids do not negatively affect other plants, people, or pets. Chemical treatments to prevent the adult egg laying are difficult to time right and require multiple spring time treatments. The cost in both chemical and time to treat successfully make control efforts unpractical. On the plus side though, in the fall when infected leaves drop onto a concrete surface and slightly dry out, stepping on them produces a quite satisfying popping sound. Perhaps only if one is into popping sounds, I suppose.

Hackberry berries are quite favored by birds and small mammals. Human uses of the trees are limited to building crates and boxes, as firewood, and as food seasoning as previously noted. Hackberry trees are also frequently, and successfully, used as windbreak trees and as hardwood components in natural area and wildlife habitat plantings.

One of the first trees that comes to mind when asked what grows well in our area, doesn't need a lot of care, can withstand our summer and winter extremes, and grows fast is the hackberry. It may not be the perfect tree for everyone, but no tree is that.

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