

Announcing the

2019

URBAN




of the year

drumroll....




American hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*)


Every fall SMA puts out an email blast to members requesting nominations, and then votes, for Urban Tree of the Year. Praise for this year's winner, American hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*), comes from some of its fans: Dr. Nina Bassuk at Cornell; Dr. Eric Wiseman at Virginia Tech; Todd Kucharski in Sarasota, Florida (and formerly in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin); and Keith Martin in Southlake, Texas. Readers are encouraged to add their observations to the SMA Member Listserv.



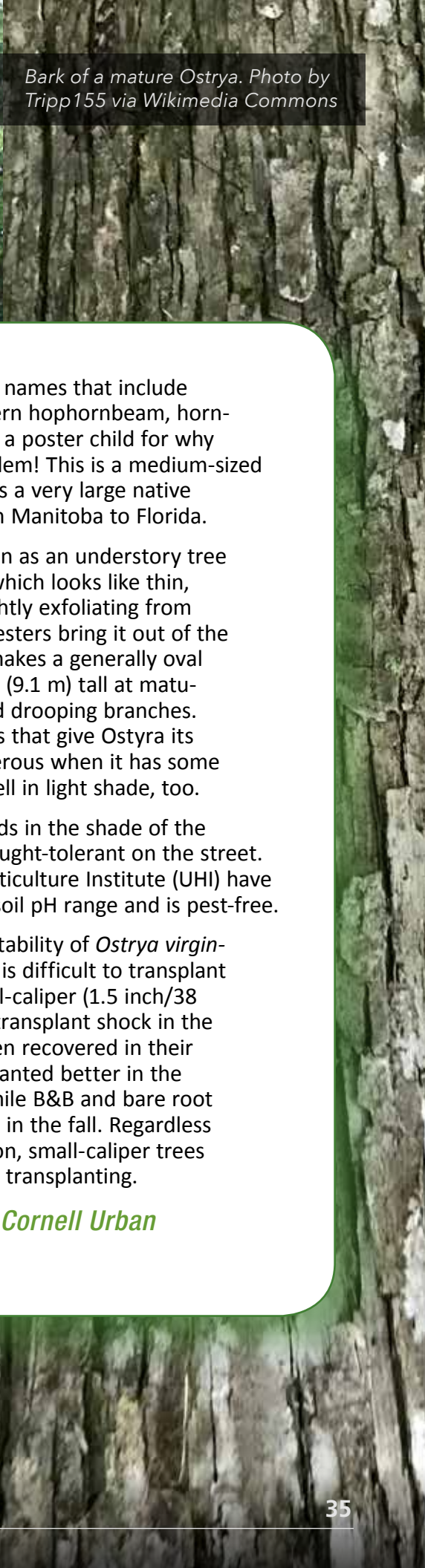
The leaves of hophornbeam have an acuminate tip, and their edges are doubly serrated.
Photo by Paul Wray via Bugwood.org



The female *Ostrya* catkins morph into showy clusters of drooping seed pods that look like hops.
Photo by Eric Hunt - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0



Ostrya tree. Photo by Paul Wray via Bugwood.org



Bark of a mature *Ostrya*. Photo by Tripp155 via Wikimedia Commons

Ostrya virginiana has common names that include American hophornbeam, Eastern hophornbeam, hornbeam, ironwood, leverwood ... a poster child for why common names can be a problem! This is a medium-sized tree in the birch family that has a very large native range east of the Rockies, from Manitoba to Florida.

Ostrya can be found most often as an understory tree and is distinctive for its bark, which looks like thin, evenly spaced stringy strips lightly exfoliating from the trunk. When we urban foresters bring it out of the forest and onto the street, it makes a generally oval to rounded tree, about 30 feet (9.1 m) tall at maturity, with somewhat downward drooping branches. The distinctive hop-like flowers that give *Ostrya* its common name are most numerous when it has some sunlight, but the tree grows well in light shade, too.

Although it manages dry periods in the shade of the forest, it is not particularly drought-tolerant on the street. However, we at the Urban Horticulture Institute (UHI) have found that it tolerates a wide soil pH range and is pest-free.

Our UHI research on transplantability of *Ostrya virginiana* agrees with others that it is difficult to transplant successfully. [In our study](#), small-caliper (1.5 inch/38 mm) trees showed significant transplant shock in the first year after planting but then recovered in their second year. B&B trees transplanted better in the spring than bare root trees, while B&B and bare root trees transplanted equally well in the fall. Regardless of production method or season, small-caliper trees would be recommended when transplanting.

—*Nina Bassuk, Director, Cornell Urban Horticulture Institute*



Ostrya virginiana was a favorite of mine when I was the city forester for the City of Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. Although its native range extends southeast to here in Florida, I have yet to see one in my neck of the woods (Sarasota, on Florida’s Gulf Coast). Nonetheless, having a wide native growing range is a notable positive trait for this tree.

The fruit of this tree looks like hops that are used for beer. It has a neat clean overall look, with leaves that look like ridged potato chips and are a dull to lime-green color that stand out from the leaves of more common street trees like maples and oaks. Plus, it is common for some of the dead leaves to remain on the branches through winter, adding character to overcast wintery days.

How about that common name, “Ironwood”! Other trees with common names like crabapple, hackberry, or 2007 SMA Tree of the Year, bald cypress, must all be envious. As you may know, ironwood acquired that name because of the great strength of its wood, which is prized for tool handles, fence posts, etc.


For use in an urban setting, ironwood has few limits, and relatively low maintenance requirements. Because it generally has a maximum height of around 40 feet (12.2 m), it doesn’t get out of scale on a residential property, park, or streetscape setting. Another major advantage is its tolerance to deer/buck rubbing because of its bark type. Lastly, it has no serious insect or disease problems. What more could an urban forester ask for in a street tree?

—*Todd A. Kucharski, CPM, General Manager,
Public Works Department, City of Sarasota, Florida*

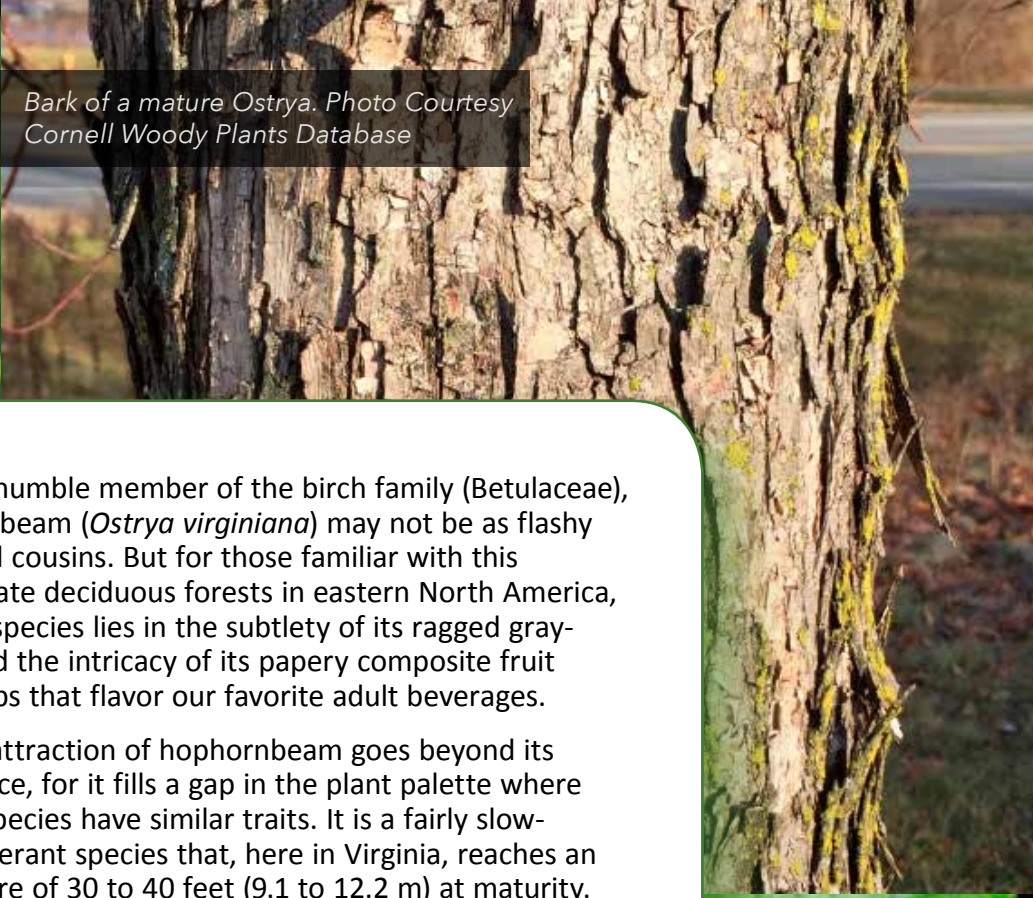


Ostrya shading diners on the student center patio at Virginia Tech. Photo by Eric Wiseman





Leaf and fruit closeup. Photo by Steven Katovich via Bugwood.org



Bark of a mature *Ostrya*. Photo Courtesy Cornell Woody Plants Database

Perhaps the most humble member of the birch family (Betulaceae), American hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*) may not be as flashy as its white-barked cousins. But for those familiar with this denizen of temperate deciduous forests in eastern North America, the beauty of the species lies in the subtlety of its ragged grayish-brown bark and the intricacy of its papery composite fruit resembling the hops that flavor our favorite adult beverages.

For arborists, the attraction of hophornbeam goes beyond its outward appearance, for it fills a gap in the plant palette where few other native species have similar traits. It is a fairly slow-growing, shade-tolerant species that, here in Virginia, reaches an intermediate stature of 30 to 40 feet (9.1 to 12.2 m) at maturity. It is hardy in zones 3 through 9A and is known to tolerate poor soil conditions, provided soil drainage is adequate. This makes it a good candidate for planting in narrow tree lawns, sidewalk cutouts, and parking lot buffers throughout most of the conterminous United States and southern Canada. On the Virginia Tech campus in southwest Virginia, hophornbeam was the tree of choice for an outdoor dining area on the south side of Squires Student Center where both above- and below-ground space were at a premium, yet shade and ambience were for critical to diners' comfort.

Known for its strong wood, hophornbeam also naturally takes on an excurrent growth habit with well-spaced, subordinate scaffold branches. As such, it requires minimal structural pruning and holds up well in storms and busy urban environments. Given its slow growth rate, transplanting and aftercare require attention and patience. But once established, hophornbeam has few serious pest or disease problems.

If you are looking for a tough native tree with subtle ornamental flair, you might want to incorporate a few hophornbeam into your next planting project in the urban forest.

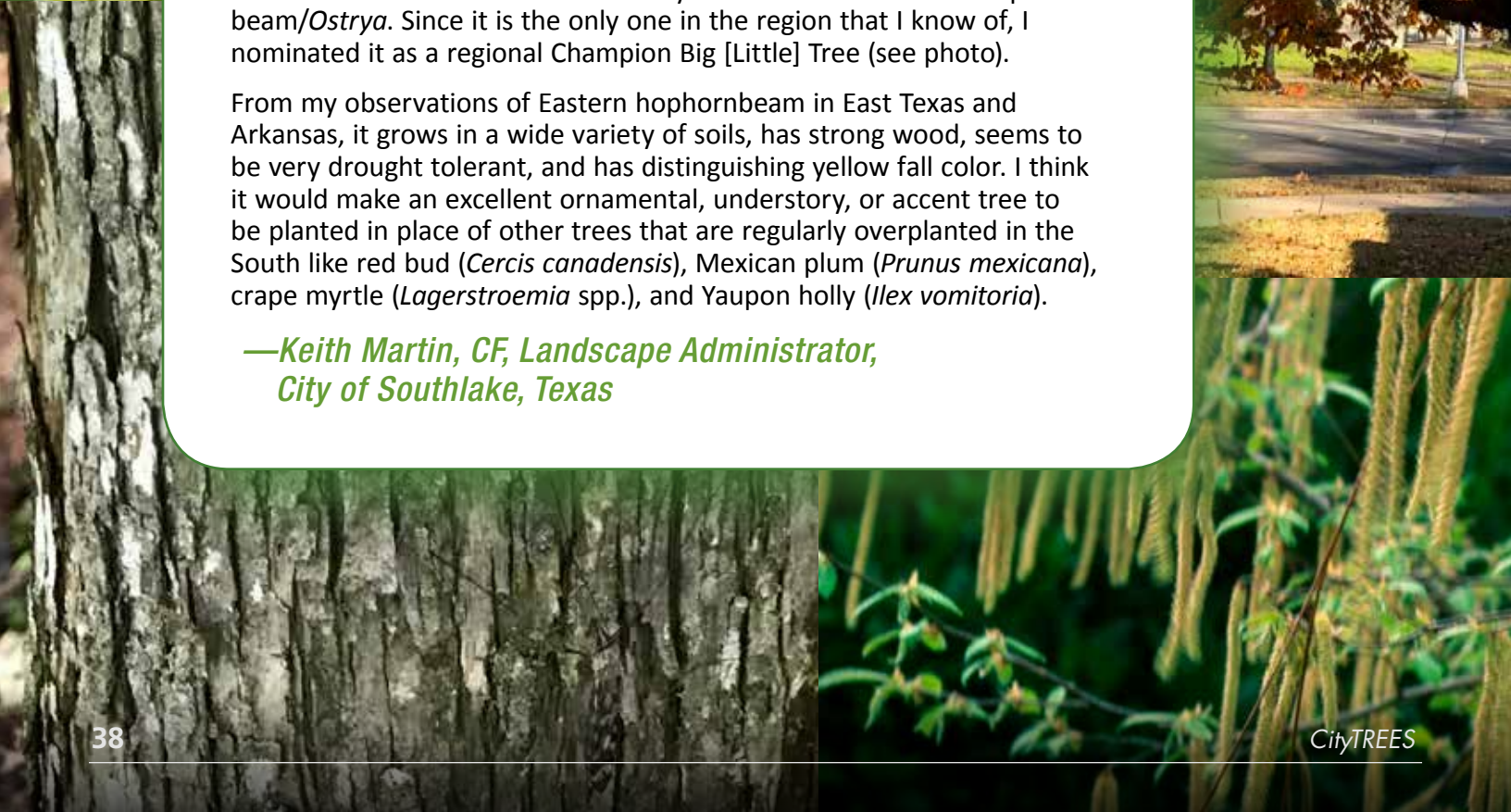
**—Eric Wiseman, Associate Professor of Urban Forestry,
Dept. of Forest Resources and Environmental
Conservation, Virginia Tech**



Ostrya virginiana isn't native west of Dallas, but I am familiar with it from growing up in Houston and East Texas. I nominated it simply because I think it should be used more in urban landscape settings, including my part of North Texas where thus far, I have only come across one, in a friend's yard in Fort Worth. At first I paid no attention to it because there are American elms (*Ulmus americana*) and red elms (*U. rubra*) in the area, and the *Ostrya* blends in with them. Then one day I noticed its distinctive catkins and immediately knew it was an Eastern hophornbeam/*Ostrya*. Since it is the only one in the region that I know of, I nominated it as a regional Champion Big [Little] Tree (see photo).

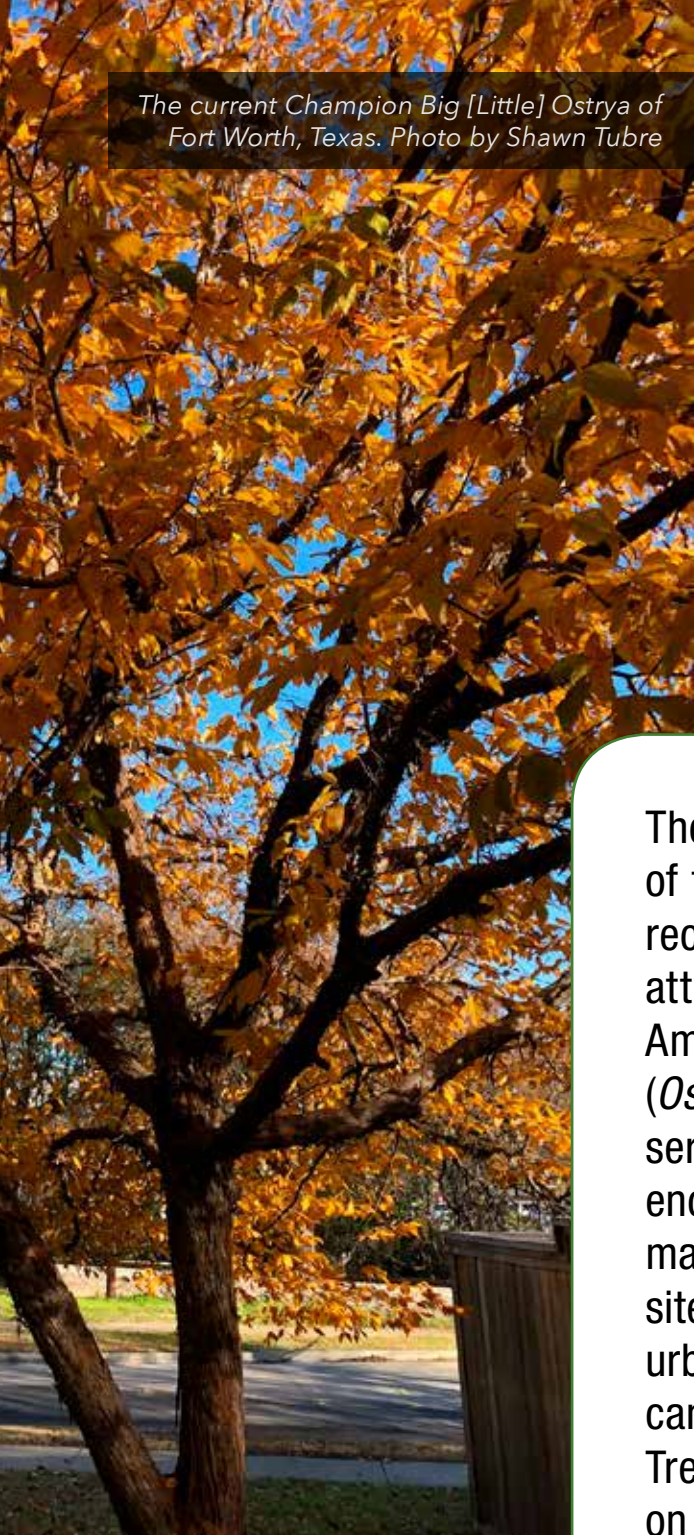
From my observations of Eastern hophornbeam in East Texas and Arkansas, it grows in a wide variety of soils, has strong wood, seems to be very drought tolerant, and has distinguishing yellow fall color. I think it would make an excellent ornamental, understory, or accent tree to be planted in place of other trees that are regularly overplanted in the South like red bud (*Cercis canadensis*), Mexican plum (*Prunus mexicana*), crape myrtle (*Lagerstroemia* spp.), and Yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*).

—Keith Martin, CF, Landscape Administrator,
City of Southlake, Texas

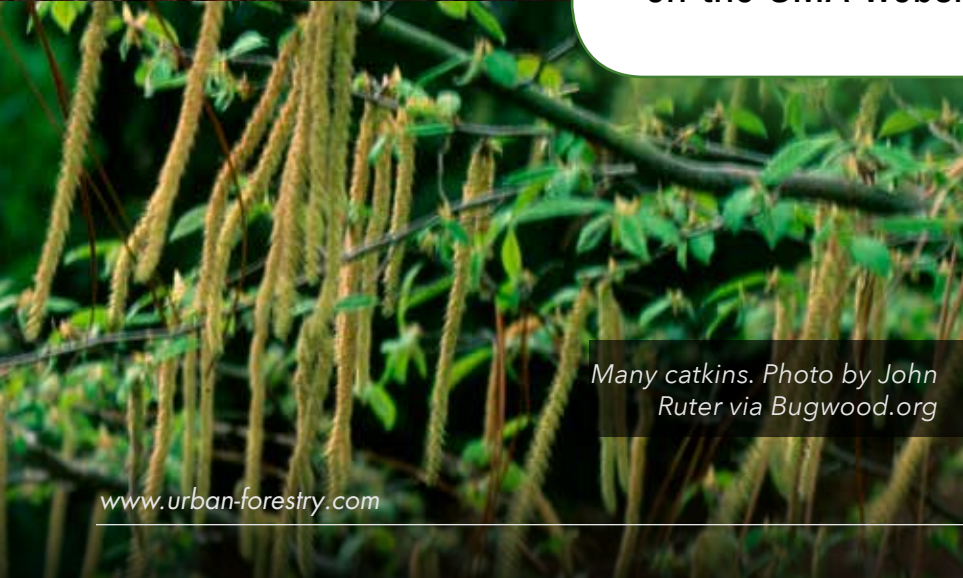


The current Champion Big [Little] *Ostrya* of Fort Worth, Texas. Photo by Shawn Tubre

Ostrya catkins. Photo by Rob Routledge via Bugwood.org



The SMA 2019 Urban Tree of the Year designation recognizes the underutilized, attractive, and useful American hophornbeam (*Ostrya virginiana*) for its service to urban forests and encourages its use when matched appropriately to site and as part of a diverse urban tree inventory. You can see the [full list](#) of past Tree of the Year winners on the SMA website.



Many catkins. Photo by John Ruter via Bugwood.org