

Species Spotlight: The White Walnut

“White walnut?? What’s that??” If this is your first thought, you’re not alone! White walnut tree, or *Juglans cinerea*, is the reclusive cousin of the more common black walnut, *Juglans nigra*. This beauty has buttery-tasting nuts that are sometimes used in baking...which explains why people call it the “butternut tree!” You can find these trees growing from Mississippi into eastern Canada. White walnuts prefer the nutrient-rich soil of hardwood forests, but they can live in a variety of soil types as long as they get plenty of sunshine. They have relatively short lifespans, but white walnuts can reach up to 60 feet in height and 50 feet in canopy.

Historically, people have used the white walnut for dyes, furniture, and even medicine. The white walnut also provides great habitat value by serving as food for animals. Sadly, the tree is under great threat today. The invasive fungus *Sirococcus clavigignenti-juglandacearum* has extended across the white walnut’s range and kills any tree it infects. The fungus causes deep sores called cankers, which look like wide black slits bordered with white. Once it finds an opening, the fungus enters the veins of the tree and destroys its ability to transport both nutrients and water. When looking for the fungus, you should examine the trunk and base of the tree for cankers and check the crown for dieback. The fungus can survive for up to 2 years after a tree dies, so you should be wary about planting new butternuts too close.

White walnut trees are relatively hard to find given their recent decline and likeness in appearance to black walnut trees. In order to identify a white walnut, you should look for a couple tell-tale features. First, look for plated, silver-gray bark with dark crevices. This bark differs from the blockier, dark bark of black walnut. Second, look for the mustache! Each branch has a leaf scar with a little mustache-like band of hair hovering right above it. Third, you can search for the nuts that are likely spread on the ground around the tree. White walnut nuts are shaped like slightly fuzzy footballs and are smaller than the nuts of the black walnut. Be sure to check out the two beautiful specimens we have in the garden next time you’re attending a walk-through or volunteering event!