
BWSR FEATURED PLANT

AMERICAN BASSWOOD *Tilia americana*

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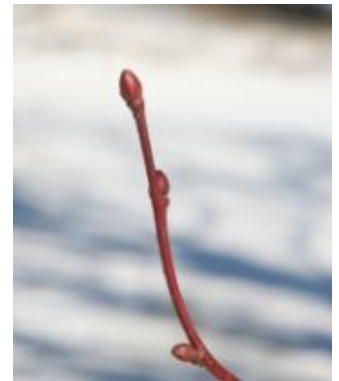
American basswood has many functions in the Minnesota landscape including habitat and food sources for a variety of birds and animals, an important nectar source for pollinators, shoreline stabilization, urban and stream cooling, carbon sequestration, and soil enrichment. The species has also been heavily used by humans for building materials and medicine. The name basswood is derived from "bastwood" that refers to the fibrous inner bark that was used by Native Americans and early pioneers for making a variety of materials including ropes, rugs, nets, and baskets. The species is widespread in Minnesota where it is found as a component of many mesic plant communities.



Large, dark green basswood leaves (images provided by Dave Hanson)

Identification

The large, red buds of basswood are noticeable in the winter and are helpful for identification. The bark is flat and smooth when young, but in long flat strips as the tree ages. The leaves of basswood are heart-shaped at the base, alternate, large and coarsely serrated. The leaves have rusty brown hairs in the axils of primary veins. The flowers are yellowish white, fragrant and drooping in clusters of 6-20 flowers per stalk. The stalk extends from an oblong, leaf-like bract. Fruits are about 8-10 mm wide, and are hard and dry when ripe. The tree commonly has multiple stems and has a rounded canopy reaching 60-120 feet tall. The non-native little leaf linden (*Tilia cordata*) that is commonly used as a street tree has smaller leaves and a pointed canopy.

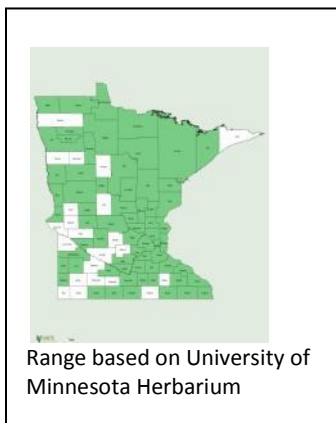


Large, red buds are helpful for winter identification

Habitat/Range

Basswood is found throughout Minnesota but is less common in the southwest prairie region. The species ranges from southern Canada south to Florida and Texas, east to the Atlantic Ocean, and west to the Dakotas and down to Texas. The species is most dominant in Maple-Basswood forests but is also found in other plant communities such as oak forests, lowland forests and floodplains where there are mesic and deep, well drained soils. It prefers a pH from 4.5 to 7.5 but occurs most often in less acidic soils.

Basswood is commonly associated with sugar maple, ironwood, red oak, American elm, white ash, and red maple trees.



Basswood is typically found scattered within mesic plant communities.

Uses

The flowers of basswood are used for a variety of conditions including inflammation, colds, fever, headache, infections and high blood pressure. The leaves, wood and charcoal of basswood have also been used for a variety of ailments ranging from liver and kidney disorders, fever, skin inflammation, and edema. The wood is soft and has a consistent texture, making it ideal for wood carving, picture frames, wood turning, guitars and other wood working. It is also used for veneer and pulp. The sap of basswood was used as a sugary drink or cooked into a syrup by Native Americans. Basswood leaves can be eaten by humans when they are tender in spring, and the seeds are eaten by a variety of species including chipmunks, mice and squirrels. Hollow cavities are common in basswood trees and are used by a variety of animals including wood ducks, chickadees, pileated woodpeckers, owls, squirrels, fisher and many other species. The flowers of basswood are a rich source of nectar for pollinators including bumblebees, other native bees, honeybees, flies, moths and other insects. Basswood honey is light colored and is known for having a strong biting flavor. A wide variety of insects feed on the leaves, wood and other parts of the tree.



Basswood is an important species for many pollinators

Basswood is common along lakes and rivers where it is excellent at stabilizing shorelines with an extensive, deep root system. The roots also provide calcium and magnesium from deep soil layers for other woodland plants, and aid carbon sequestration.

Basswood is valued by bee keepers as a rich source of nectar.

Planting Recommendations

After timber harvest basswood has the ability to re-sprout from the base. As a result, trees should be cut low to the ground so they regenerate near the soil surface instead of the stump. The species can be planted from seed but it may take two or three years in some cases to germinate due to a tough seed coat. Seed should be spread in the fall and should be raked or harrowed into the soil and covered with a light layer of leaves to aid establishment and prevent them from being eaten by rabbits and deer. It is best to plant bare root seedlings shortly after snowmelt to take advantage of available soil moisture and to allow time for plants to establish before warm temperatures, as the large leaves of basswood make it susceptible to drying. Seedlings prefer full to partial shade but can be planted in relatively shady conditions. Holes should be dug large enough to accommodate the entire root system of the plant. Containerized plants can be planted most of the season including late fall, however mid-summer planting should be avoided to prevent heat stress. New plantings should receive about one-inch of water per week. Protection may be needed to prevent rodents such as mice, voles and rabbits from girdling young trees.



Basswood with multiple stems of different diameters

Additional References

<http://www.ag.ndsu.edu/trees/handbook/th-3-123.pdf>

<http://wisplants.uwsp.edu/scripts/detail.asp?SpCode=TILAMEvAME>

<http://plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=tiam>