

# Bird Friendly Native Plant of the Month

MAY 2016

NC NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

REEDY CREEK NATURE PRESERVE



*American Redstart*

*Photos by Will Stuart*



## *Betula nigra* River Birch

### Landscape Uses

River Birch can be a beautiful specimen in a mixed woodland or stream-side border with native species such as Stonecrop, Christmas Fern, White Wood Aster, Virginia Bluebells and Fothergilla. Rick Darke

s u g g e s t s planting this type of border all at one time to allow the roots to form a community rather than to disturb the surface roots later. River Birch is also useful in stream restoration to stabilize erosion situations. River Birch can grow to 80 feet tall and is commonly trained to a multi-stemmed trunk. A word of caution—River Birch roots seek

water and should be sited well away from sewer and septic lines.

### Bark in the Park

The reason we love a River Birch is for that attractive peeling bark. Planting one in your garden adds an interesting, year-round focal point.

The satiny bark peels to reveal cinnamon-brown trunk underneath.

Luckily, *Betula nigra* is fast and easy to find and easy to grow in most gardens, which could also explain why you see it in many urban

areas. While it prefers moist soil, and can tolerate flooding and poor drainage, it is adaptable to our clay soils and even to dry areas. However,

it is best to keep it watered as River Birch does not tolerate drought.

### Wildlife Benefits

River Birch seeds are plentiful and provide food for goldfinch, pine siskin, blue jay, sparrow, chickadee and northern junco. Birches can also be important nesting sites for red-tailed hawks and cavity nesting sites for woodpeckers. Birch bark strips are useful nest building materials for birds and squirrels. The yellow-bellied sapsucker drills into birches creating leaking sap to attract ants which the bird then eats.

Doug Tallamy ranks birches in the Top 5 best woody plants for wildlife as a host for a bounty of caterpillars, the most important food for baby songbirds. Songbirds also feast on the flower buds. River Birch even offers food to birds in the winter by allowing woodpeckers to nibble on insects hiding under peeling bark.

Bird Friendly Native Plant of the Month is a joint effort of the NC Native Plant Society and Audubon North Carolina.

### Where did the sun go?

*We love our trees in the Piedmont, but it's not great for growing lush green lawns. In fact it's a constant struggle to get grass to grow in shade—really a situation of wrong plant wrong place. Consider converting those shady areas of your lawn to woodland species such as Heuchera or Allegheny Spurge.*

