

Tree Profile: Birch - *Betula* Species

General Information: A birch is a thin-leaved deciduous hardwood tree of the genus *Betula*, in the family Betulaceae, which also includes alders, hazels, and hornbeams. It is closely related to the beech-oak family Fagaceae. The genus *Betula* contains 30 to 60 known taxa of which 11 are on the IUCN 2011 Red List of Threatened Species. (Wikipedia). It originates from cool regions of the northern hemisphere.

Hardy, quick growing, and relatively resistant to disease and insect attack, birches are considered pioneer trees, first to establish themselves on cleared land. Most require moist, sandy, and loamy soil; they are usually propagated by seeding or grafting.

Birches are handsome deciduous trees usually prized for their white to pinkish brown coloured trunks, often with peeling bark. Graceful branches provide perfect dappled shade, bursting with delicate fresh green leaves in spring, which turn to golden yellow in autumn before falling. Most are medium-sized trees growing between 6 and 30 metres high. Birches are often planted in groups, just as they are found in nature.

Leaves are alternate, toothed, ovate, mid to dark green turning to yellow or orange in Autumn.

The most common variety available in Australia is probably the silver birch, *Betula pendula*.

Lighting: Full sun, rotate often to expose all sides of the tree. Birches tend to have shiny brown trunks when immature and in a pot it, can take many years of growth before they form the familiar silvery-white bark. The bark must be exposed to direct summer sun to speed up this process, as specimens growing in shade take longer to change colour. Some protection from hot, drying winds may be of benefit.

Temperature: Birches require a generally cool temperate climate and are resistant to frost, however seem to tolerate Melbourne conditions quite well.

Watering: Require a lot of water during the hot summer or dry periods, due to their shallow, fibrous root system.

Feeding: For trees in development, fertilise regularly to rapidly thicken trunk and branches. For trees in refinement, do not start feeding until after initial spring growth has hardened, to minimise coarse growth.

Pruning and Wiring: Prune back new shoots to 2-3 leaves after flushes of growth through the growing season. Hard pruning can be carried out from budburst in Spring until late Summer but ensure wounds are well sealed as Birch bleed heavily and are prone to die-back around large cut areas. Try to avoid doing any pruning while the tree is not in active growth to reduce the possibility of dieback. Strong and healthy Birch can be defoliated in Summer.

Propagation: Sow seed outside in Autumn. Softwood cuttings in Summer.

Repotting: Every two to three years in Spring as buds extend, use a free-draining soil mix. Do not root prune Birch too early; it is better to root prune a little late after the new buds have opened than it is to root prune while still dormant.

Pests and Diseases: Generally resistant, but watch for rust, aphids and mildew and treat appropriately if detected.

Styling: Informal upright forms with single or multiple trunks in small to extra-large sizes.

Species Suitable for Bonsai: There are many species and hybrids that are also suitable for bonsai but the following are the most common:

Betula pendula – Silver Birch

Betula pubescens – Downy Birch

Betula nana – a dwarf birch variety



Photo courtesy of bonsai4me.com. Tree styled by Harry Harrington.



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