

Tree Identification Made Easier

By Susan Camp

While I was having lunch last week with some former colleagues, my friend, Janet, who is a Virginia Master Naturalist, told us of a recent nature walk with other naturalists. The group heard a bird call in the distance, and one woman casually remarked, “Oh, that’s a rufous-sided towhee.”

“How do you do that?” asked an amazed Janet.

‘The woman replied, “When you’ve been listening for 40 years like I have, you just recognize their calls.”

I started thinking about how to how to identify trees. After years of study, a person is bound to recognize species by a variety of characteristics. Most of us can distinguish evergreen from deciduous trees, except for the occasional deciduous evergreen like the dawn redwood, but what about identifying various oak or maple species?

The Tree Steward course provided us with valuable information, not just on varieties, but on planting, pruning, maintenance, and disease and insect pests. The real work, though, began after we left the classroom and went out to examine trees. It is impossible to diagnose problems or improve care when the species remains a mystery.

Excellent tree books are available on the market, but some are weighty tomes or huge coffee table books of gorgeous, color photographs that prove unwieldy for carrying into the woods. Field guides are portable, but the pictures are small, as is the print.

Some excellent online articles, including the University of Florida IFAS Extension 13-page Publication #FOR234 “How to Identify a Tree” provide a logical method to identify trees, with the bonus of color close-up shots of leaves, bark, flowers, fruit, and seeds. Range and habitat are discussed in the article as significant filters used to rule out species. An extensive reference list at the end of the article offers further resources.

By systematically gathering clues about a tree’s physical characteristics, you can learn to differentiate between a tulip poplar and a sycamore, a redbud and a chaste tree. You can even identify differences between red and white oaks. We usually think of red oaks as having bristled, pointed leaves and dark bark, while white oaks have rounded lobes and lighter bark, but these characteristics are used only as a rule of thumb. Many species of oaks exist, and relying entirely on these two common characteristics can blur recognition, leading to misidentification.

Go to the Virginia Department of Forestry website at dof.virginia.gov/tree/index.htm and click on “Trees and Seedlings.” The page offers links to tree identification books, planting and care, landscaping, special interest, and even where to purchase trees and seedlings. If you click on the heading “Tree Identification Resources,” you will reach “Virginia Tech Dendrology Factsheets,” a database search page where you can enter the name of a tree, a state, Hardiness Zone, and biome or ecological area. By simply entering the common name “red oak,” I was rewarded with six factsheet choices, four with links to landowner factsheets. When I returned to the database

page and entered more detailed information, the number of red oak species native to our region was narrowed even further.

Each tree factsheet offers concise descriptions, color photos of identifying characteristics, a biome map, and links to other helpful sites. The landowner factsheet provides brief statements on timber and wildlife value, regeneration methods, important disease and insect problems, and some fun facts about each tree.

You may not be able to identify a specific cultivar using one of these methods, but you will have a less frustrating time trying to figure out why that little tree at the edge of the woods never fills out in the spring. It might not be the tree you thought it was and you may not be caring for it correctly.

As for the rufous-sided towhee, I will leave the 40 years of bird call identification to my friend. I have 40 years of tree identification to master.

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