River Birch
*Betula nigra*

It’s no surprise to hear that you would most likely find a river birch along a stream bank. Also called black birch or water birch, *Betula nigra* is the most southerly of all birches due to its heat tolerance, though it can be found in marshy areas as far north as New Hampshire. Throughout its natural range, river birches are often situated in the water, though they can be damaged by sheets of ice moving quickly downstream. Seeds are often spread by the nearby waterway, or by wind.

The multiple trunks of the river birch create good nesting conditions, especially for waterfowl. With this trunk structure, these trees often grow as wide as they grow tall, which can be up to 90 feet. The bark is its most signature quality, with its separation into papery scales, a process known as “shingling.” Lenticels, or the tree’s breathing pores, are located on this bark as well as the buds. In spring, river birches have dangling flowers called catkins and display lime-colored new growth. Their leaves are deep green and triangular with serrated edges.

River birches are a popular choice for ornamental trees throughout the Chicago region. They do best in direct sunlight and can withstand flooding. In the heavy alkaline soils of the Midwest, river birches struggle with summers, when the soil usually dries out. They are also susceptible to chlorosis, or a lack of chlorophyll, characterized by yellowing leaves. To ensure their health and maximize their access to nutrients, river birches need mulching and attentive watering in warmer months, and no competition from grass or other plants surrounding the trunk. With a little care, river birches can be great four-season additions to urban landscapes.

For more information on this species, please contact trees@openlands.org.