

Wood of The Month

American hornbeam – *Carpinus caroliniana*.

And

Hophornbeam – *Ostrya virginiana*



American Hornbeam



Hophornbeam

At the risk of causing confusion, this article will cover two different woods with similar names, that share similar characteristics and are both found here in Missouri. To start off on a side note; this is a good example as to why scientific names are so very important in wood identification and nomenclature.

Both woods are in the birch family and are sometimes confused with birch. **American hornbeam** is also sometimes called Blue Beech even though it is not related to beech. The sapwood is very wide and lighter in color therefore the boards it produces are mostly made from the sapwood. The heartwood is a pale yellowish or brownish white. The wood is very hard and tough “as a horn”, and was used as an ox yoke thus giving it the name hornbeam. The wood wears very well and resists splitting and ranks as one of the hardest and strongest woods known in eastern North America – surpassing oak, hickory, locust and persimmon. It is therefore used for tool handles, golf clubs, and mallets and is an excellent turning wood. However, it may require more time, patience and care to work because the tree grows so short, crooked and contorted that the grain can abruptly change. Another name for hornbeam is; musclewood. The

tree's trunk grows fluted into muscle-like ridges giving the appearance of muscles, hence the name.

Eastern hophornbeam, as stated before, is also in the birch family and is sometimes confused with birch. It is sometimes called American Ironwood and hornbeam. The tree gets its name from the seed clusters that are packaged in little parchment-like bags that resemble the hops that are used in brewing. The wood has a whitish wide sapwood with heartwood that varies from whitish to light brown tinged with red. The tree is a smaller tree reaching only 40 to 50 feet in height and 1 to 1.5 feet in diameter. The wood is also very tough and wears well and therefore is used in farm vehicle parts such as axels, handles, mallets, canes, woodenware and novelties, splitting wedges, and fuel wood. It also requires care and patience in working using carbide tools and requires pilot holes. Some describe hophornbeam as a poor man's lignumvitae.

In colonial times, a fluid extract was used to treat malaria. Both bark and inner bark have been used to treat indigestion and fever.

You can read more about American hornbeam at; [The Wood Database](#) and Hophornbeam also on [The Wood Database](#).

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