

NATURALLY: The elusive American butternut

- By Dana Driscoll Special to the Gazette
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There is a very special and rare tree that exists in White's Woods, known as the American butternut or white walnut (*Juglans cinerea*). Butternut trees are native to Pennsylvania, with a traditional range across most of the U.S. East Coast. Butternut prefers a colder climate and is often found in the middle elevations of our mountains — such as right here in Indiana, sitting at 1,301 feet. Butternut is often found growing as a single tree or in very small groups. Butternut grows in

forests with other hardwood tree species such as sugar maple, tulip poplar, white oak, black cherry and sweet birch. This makes butternut a perfect companion for other trees common in White's Woods and our other public forests here in Indiana County.

Many people may mistake butternut trees for eastern black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) trees. Butternut has a similar look to walnut trees, with pinnate leaves (where there are many leaflets opposite of each other on either side of a central stalk). However, the wood is much lighter in color, which is how it got the name “white walnut.”



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The easiest way to identify a butternut is the nut — the nut is covered in a sticky, hairy fuzz that is green and the nuts themselves are shaped like footballs. Another key identifying feature is that butternuts drop earlier than walnuts — sometimes as early as late August or early September.

When you are walking in White's Woods or another local forest and see elongated, fuzzy nuts on the ground in the fall — pick a few up! Eat one and plant three, and help spread the butternut.

Butternuts get their name from the taste of their nut, which is nutty, sweet, and has a high fat content. These nuts were a staple food source for indigenous Americans, and settlers boiled them and used the resulting oil as a kind of nut butter.

Butternuts have a milder flavor than our native black walnuts. You can eat them raw or roast them lightly. If you let them sit in the husks over the winter, the flavor will deepen and change. Although they are tasty, given what I will write next, I suggest you work to plant and propagate most of the butternuts you find (although, when you find a tree and it is an abundant year, you can harvest many!).

While it was never a dominant tree, it now is in serious decline. In fact, the International Union for Conservation of Nature lists butternut as an endangered species while Pennsylvania's Department of Conservation of Natural Resources lists it as a "species of concern." Butternut canker (a type of fungus), introduced from imported Japanese walnut stock in the early 20th century, has been killing off Butternut trees throughout its range and has been spreading each year.

Our native black walnut trees do not seem to be affected by this fungus, but it is decimating butternut populations. Since butternut is in the walnut species, to fight against the butternut canker, researchers have been creating hybrid "buartnut" species that crosses Japanese walnut (resistant to the canker) with butternut.

To propagate butternuts, find a healthy butternut tree (such as those in White's Woods) and gather the nuts in the late summer or early fall — either from mature nuts on the tree or from the ground.

You should remove the husk — let the nuts sit for a week or two and the husks will soften. You can then roll the nuts on gravel or a stone, or even peel the husk off with a knife — but be aware, the nuts can stain your hands. Now do a float test — float the nut in a bucket of water to see if it is viable. If the nuts float after 1 minute, they are not viable. If they sink to the bottom of the bucket, they are viable and you can plant them. There are a few options for planting. The easiest thing to do is to plant them in the fall, directly in a place where you want the butternuts. They are shade-intolerant, so find a place that gets lots of sun. If you want to start them in pots,

choose large 12-inch or more pots as butternut has a deep taproot. Leave them outside or in an unheated garage in the winter to cold stratify. Once they sprout, transplant them outside.

If you are interested in helping preserve butternut species, Adventure Scientists (Adventurescientists.org), a citizen science group, is supporting a butternut tree field project that trains you to help restore butternut forests by learning to identify, collect leaf samples for DNA analysis and record data on tree health. I will also note that there are similar projects on the American beech and eastern hemlock, two other trees that need our support!

Dr. Dana Driscoll, a professor of English at IUP, has been teaching wild food foraging, herbalism, and sustainable living for more than ten years. These columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.

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