

Featured

## NATURALLY: Of beeches and books

- By Dana Driscoll Special to the Gazette
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Growing up in the Allegheny Mountains, I spent the first part of my childhood with my grandfather and cousins learning about plants, animals, and trees in the woods. There was a special place we went, the only place in the forest with the tall, smooth beech trees (*Fagus grandifolia*). With smooth light gray bark looking almost like paper, the beeches would reach high up into the canopy, often surrounded by many small baby trees, all coming from and being nourished by the mother tree. One of the oldest of the mother beech trees died and came down, and over a few short years, all of the smaller beeches grew tall in her place. That mother tree already had her offspring ready to grow to replace her.

Just like the old beech tree that fell, my grandfather passed when I was still a child. After his funeral, my cousins and I went to our special place and carved messages of love and remembrance in the soft gray beech bark. I still visit that place, decades later, and find the messages we left for grandfather. While the bark of these trees holds the memories, what we didn't know at the time as children is how damaging the common practice of creating "arborglyphs" is to these trees. Carvings like these created by people and so commonly found in our local parks on well-traveled trails, can damage or even kill the beech tree. These carvings create an opening for the fatal beech bark disease, insect infestation, and can also damage the tree's xylem and phloem, which are layers of inner bark that transport nutrients.

Beech trees are of the genus *Fagus* (Fagaceae), which contains 14 species spread across Asia, Europe, and North America. What is located in White's Woods and many other Indiana County parks is *Fagus grandifolia*, the American Beech. Our native beech tree is a slow growing tree, typically reaching heights of 65 to more than 100 feet tall. This beech prefers shady and damp environments and is often found in forests with Eastern Hemlocks, Sugar Maples, and Black and Yellow Birches. Like Sugar Maple, beech cannot tolerate pollution, soil compaction, road salt,

and other human-caused contaminants. These features make beech a true tree of the forest rather than one found in cities or towns. Beech trees used to grow throughout North America, but now they are primarily found on the east coast due to ecological disruptions during the last Ice age. The oldest beech trees can live more than 300 years — and we have some that old in Pennsylvania, including the state Champion Beech near Philadelphia.

Beeches are a cornerstone species of the forest and support over 120 different species of butterflies and moths alone. Wildlife depend on the beech tree for nuts. These nuts are a high-fat, high protein food source that is critical for winter survival of many species, including bluejays, black bears, ducks, opossum, deer, mice, squirrels and others.

In most years, many pounds of beech nuts may fall to the forest floor. You can identify them by their four-section outer husk that is topped with small curled spikes. When ripe, the husk splits to reveal tiny nuts.

While beech trees produce these edible and tasty seeds, they can take up to 40 years to produce their first crop. The seed itself, which can be eaten after peeling back the husk and inner shell, is wonderful tasting, reminiscent of a cross between a pine nut and a sunflower seed. You can eat them in salads, make Beech nut pesto, or just enjoy them as a snack raw or toasted. Even finding a few seeds in the forest and snacking on them can make your day! If you plan on eating nuts in any quantity, they should be roasted or cooked.

Beech trees, as they get older, also produce many openings, great for wild bees, birds, and small mammals. In fact, most of the wild bee hives I've found have been located in beech trees — a safe and protected place!

If you sit below beech trees on a sunny day, their thin, paper-like green leaves will produce a lovely warm green light through the canopy. If you end up in a grove of hemlocks and beeches (and these trees are often found together) you'll be amazed by the variation and patchwork of light — deep blue from the Hemlocks and yellow green from the beeches.

In the wintertime, it is easy to spot young beech trees because they hold onto their leaves until almost spring. By March, when the leaves finally drop, they are paper-thin, white, and look just like parchment paper.

In fact, beech has a rich history tied to literacy, and we can see that reflected in the historical human uses of this tree. The word “beech” and the word “book” have the same etymology (word history), with a common word “boc” in Old English that refers to both. And this is because the first books in Europe were made with thinly sliced beech wood, bound together. These beech books were used for centuries before the invention of paper or the printing press.

The soot of beech trees also makes an ink called “Bistre” or “soot brown” which was favored by artists in the 17th and 18th centuries including Rembrandt, Lorrain, and Cozens. Leonardo DaVinci’s many drawings in brown ink, are all made of Bistre ink — and you can see how they have held up through the centuries. To make Bistre, soot was typically gathered from a chimney after burning beech wood, ground and filtered, then mixed with water and sometimes a gum binder.

While you are reading your beech wood books and writing with Bistre, you might also enjoy a handful of beech nuts. Young beech leaves are also a nice edible treat, having a slightly sweet kale flavor. As you get out into the woods this year, be on the lookout for the amazing American Beech!

*Dr. Dana Driscoll, a professor of English at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, has been teaching wild food foraging, and sustainable living for more than 10 years. The Naturally 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.*