

Ash Trees: Identification

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One of the frustrations I dealt with when I first started writing about emerald ash borer (EAB) back in 2003 was that so many people had no idea what types of trees they had in their yard. So, I would race out to examine a dying “ash” tree, only to discover I was looking at maples, oaks, poplars, and even a pine tree once.

I suppose it’s a little unreasonable to expect non-arborists to be able to identify all of the species of trees and shrubs on their property. After all, I can’t tell one piece of plumbing from another, and I’ve no idea what all those bits and parts under my car’s hood are called.

However, I think it’s important for people to be able to identify the primary set of species that EAB attacks, which are ash (*Fraxinus* spp.). A handy guide to help you identify ash trees can be found on this web page: <http://www.emeraldashborer.info/files/E2942.pdf>.

The most important characteristic for identifying ash trees is to look for an “opposite” arrangement to their leaves and buds. Leaves and buds lie directly across the stem from each other. Very few landscape or forest trees have this opposite leaf arrangement (the other common trees that do include maples and dogwoods).

Another important characteristic is to examine the leaves. Some trees, like maple, oak, and apple have “simple” leaves, where there is one leaf blade attached to the stem. Ash trees, as well as pecans and walnuts, have a “compound” leaf, where many small leaflets are attached to a long stalk called a petiole. Ash leaves are composed of 5 to 11 leaflets. Leaflet margins may be smooth or toothed. The only other oppositely branched tree with compound leaves is boxelder (*Acer negundo*), which almost always has only three to five leaflets.

When present on trees, seeds are dry, oar-shaped samaras. They usually occur in clusters and typically hang on the tree until late fall, early winter. On mature trees, the bark is tight with a distinct pattern of diamond-shaped ridges.

There have been reports of EAB also attacking fringe trees (*Chionanthus* spp.). However, this was in areas where EAB infestations had been so high for so many years that most of the ash trees were already dead. Also, it’s not a common tree in our area, so I’m not going to spend time identifying it.

In future articles I'll discuss how to decide whether your ash trees are valuable enough to save, and what control options exist. If you have specific questions, please contact me at the Purdue Extension Service at (812) 435-5287.



Ash leaf: compound leaf with 5 to 11 leaflets along one long petiole.



Ash twig. Notice the opposite arrangement of the buds.



Bark of ash tree: notice tight, diamond-shaped ridges.



Ash seed clusters.