

Bark

By R. W. Sidwell

In selecting trees and shrubs, attention is usually paid to general form, ultimate size, flowers, foliage, fruit, autumn colour and, to a limited extent, characteristics of the bark. We will concentrate on the latter feature in this article.

Most of us are familiar with the bark of the common trees and identification is often made from this character alone. The rugged oak and smooth beech can hardly be mistaken for any other and the twisted furrows of the sweet chestnut bark makes a mature tree recognisable from a great distance. The flakey bark of the London Plane is something town-dwellers live with, often perhaps without noticing it. Such large trees, however, are seldom occupants of our gardens and we must turn to smaller things.

The birches have the most remarkable bark among our smaller deciduous trees. The native silver birch is possibly the most popular and widely-planted tree at the present time. It has almost everything a small tree should have in the modern garden. Elegant habit, not too densely shading and, of course, its beautiful bark. There are, however, other birches equal to or even finer than our native species.

The Chinese species, *Betula albo-sinensis*, has glistening bark in red, pink and orange tones. *B. jacquemontii* has the whitest bark of all, perhaps too white, as it looks as though it has been whitewashed. The birches, in common with the cherries and some other trees, have bark that peels off in paper-thin layers, leaving horizontal lenticels or breathing pores. These lenticels started life as tiny spots on one-year-old shoots. As the girth of the shoot increases, the lenticel becomes stretched horizontally until it becomes quite large. They consist of loose assemblies of corky cells through which gaseous exchange can take place.

The mention of cherries is a reminder that some fine bark is to be found among them. Both the fruiting and ornamental flowering cherries have attractive bark but the finest of all is perhaps *Prunus serrulu* with bark like polished mahogany. It is a small tree with narrow leaves and not very showy white flowers but its bark makes it a tree of distinction.

While some of the maples do not have bark of great distinction others are quite striking. The "snakebark" maples have longitudinal green and white striped bark, maintained on quite old trees. This is brought about by the bark of the original green shoots splitting longitudinally and whitish interstitial tissue being formed. The three Chinese species *A. davidii*, *grosseri* and *hersii* are fine snakebarks and, not to be outdone, North America has *A. pennsylvanicum*. *A. griseum* has papery peeling outer layers revealing rich cinnamon bark underneath.

Eucalyptus usually shed their bark in flakes and the patches revealed change colour on exposure. One of the finest, and now becoming very popular, is *E. niphophila* with cream, grey and green-patched bark.

The pines have some of the finest barks, although the ultimate size of the trees may be large for the modern garden. The orange "crocodile skin" pattern of native scots pine is familiar to most people. The stone pine *Pinus pinea* has bark of a similar colour but has very deep fissures, as much as three inches deep. The tree is broad and round-topped, often branching low down. The Aus-



Trunk of silver birch

trian and Corsican pines, with their greyish or almost black bark, are common. Less common but strikingly beautiful is *P. bungeava* from China. This has flakey bark rather after the style of the eucalyptus described above. When the flakes first fall, the exposed bark is pale grey-green. It changes through intermediate shades to rich brown-purple. This species is not easy to get and it does not always do well here but it is superb when well-grown. *P. rigida* is distinctive because it produces masses of young shoots on trunks and old branches. These give the tree a furry appearance. This again is a rather uncommon tree.

Attractive bark is not only a characteristic of trees. Shrubs, too, have bark and some of these produce fine winter effects. The golden and scarlet willows were a common feature of ditches and hedgerows in the Vale of Eversham when "withies" were produced locally for tying asparagus, leeks and onions. Those days have gone but a few gardens still grow them for their ornamental value. They require cutting hard back each year and are apt to become unsightly through the dead sticks thus produced, but with a little care the job can be done tidily.

Several species of cornus can be similarly treated and produce fine effects. *Cornus alba* has red young shoots and the variety "Kesselringii" has black-purple shoots. *C. stolonifera* "Flaviramea" has yellowish-olive shoots and is particularly pleasing.

A useful green-shooted shrub is *Kerria japonica*. This is apt to get untidy but if the older wood is cut out each year its bright stems are quite attractive.