

## “Hickory” by Sally Cureton

You may have noticed many, many little dark brown round nuts in your yard this fall. Those are hickory nuts, and come from one of the more common trees in the Massanutten Village area - the Shagbark Hickory (*Carya avata*). This is the most distinctive of the hickories. On a mature tree the light grey bark grows into long narrow strips which are loosely attached in the middle. Young trees will have smooth grey bark. The tree itself is generally large with a tall trunk and a narrow irregular crown and can grow to be 70 to 100 feet high. The leaves are compound, each leaflet being about 3-7 inches long with finely saw-toothed edges. Hickory trees grow from southern Quebec to Georgia and west to SE Texas, up to Minnesota. Their preferred habitat is in the moist soil of a valley and or on the upland slopes of mixed hardwood forests, such as we have.

The name hickory came from an Algonquin word *pawcohiccora*, which was their term for the oily residue found after pounded hickory nuts were steeped in boiling water. It was used as a spread similar to butter. The settlers shortened the Indian word to produce the term “hickory,” and expanded its meaning to include the tree itself. The oily substance developed an economic value in colonial trade and could be exchanged for various other foodstuffs. Then after the oil was removed, the remaining nutmeat was mixed with potatoes or meal or dried into cakes.

The hickory tree is a member of the walnut family along with pecans and other nut-bearing trees. The nut has a shell that is fairly thin and the inside is sweet and edible. They can be used in baked goods such as cookies and cakes, in salads and game dishes. If you want to try making a hickory pie, a pecan pie recipe can be used. Of course, most of us are familiar with a very common use of hickory - smoking meat. The mockernut hickory is one of the best for that particular use. Squirrels love hickory nuts and will eat them until they are all gone. They are also eaten to some extent by chipmunks, black bears, fox, rabbits and mice.

Hickory trees have much to recommend them. Their wood is well known for producing maximum heat, with little ash and an even-burning fire that lasts a long time. These attributes meant that it was in great demand during Colonial times for use as firewood. It was also used to fashion barrel hoops, wicker chair bottoms and baskets. The oil from the nuts could be burned in lamps. A very strong, hard wood known for its shock resistance, it is used today for tool handles, flooring, furniture and sports equipment. The nickname “Old Hickory” was given to Andrew Jackson because he was “tough as hickory.” “ There is a very good chance that you have one of these wonderful trees in your yard - just look for the distinctive bark.