

Tree Identification

Distinguishing Persimmon and Black Gum Leaves and Twigs



Persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*) and black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*) are both deciduous trees native to Illinois. On larger trees, bark and fruit characteristics make identification much easier. But sometimes, on smaller individuals telling the two species apart can be difficult. Both trees have alternate, simple leaves with entire margins and similar shapes. Without bark or fruit characteristics, identification must be made using the twigs and leaves.

Black Gum

- **Range:** Found in the southern third of Illinois and along the eastern edge.
- **Bark:** Dark and blocky, but usually more ridged and less thick than persimmon. Black gum lacks orange inner bark. (Fig. 1)
- **Fruit:** Small and dark blue to black when ripe.
- **Leaves**
 - Thinner and less waxy than persimmon leaves.
 - The tip of the leaf usually tapers more abruptly, ending in a noticeable small point and giving the tip of the leaf a pinched look. (Fig. 2)
 - Leaves may have additional small, pointed lobes at the tip of the leaf.
 - The edges of leaves, the margin, have no or only sporadic hairs.
 - Fall color is bright red to deep scarlet.
 - Base of leaves often narrow.

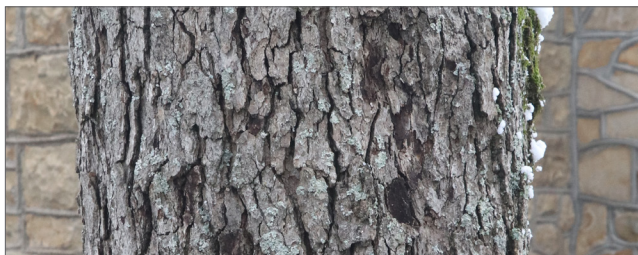


Fig. 1. Black Gum bark is thinner and more ridged than persimmon.



Fig. 2. The abrupt taper of the Black Gum leaf gives it a pinched look.

Persimmon

- **Range:** Found naturally in the southern two thirds of Illinois
- **Bark:** Very dark, nearly black. Bark is broken into thick regular blocks. Orange inner bark is often evident in the fissures. (Fig. 3-4)
- **Fruit:** Large, orange, and fleshy.
- **Leaves**
 - Typically, a bit thicker and waxier than black gum leaves.
 - The central vein on a persimmon leaf is prominent and appears wide, especially on the lower half of the leaf. (Fig. 5)
 - Leaves taper gradually to a point.
 - Close examination of the leaf edge, or margin, will show very small hairs spaced regularly.
 - Fall color is variable from yellow to orange to red.
 - Base of leaves often rounded or broad.



Fig. 3-4. Persimmon bark is dark and broken into thick regular blocks (left), often with an orange inner bark shown in the fissures (right).



Fig. 5. Persimmon leaves have a thicker central vein, especially near the lower half of the leaf.



Fig. 6. The large terminal bud and overlapping fuzzy scales of a typical black gum twig.

Black Gum

• Twigs

- The twigs are thick.
- **Terminal bud:** Large with overlapping reddish, fuzzy scales. (Fig. 6)
- **Lateral buds:** Smaller, but still reddish in color.
- Leaf scars have three distinct dots, or bundle scars.
- **Pith:** White with noticeable chambered segments. Not hollow.

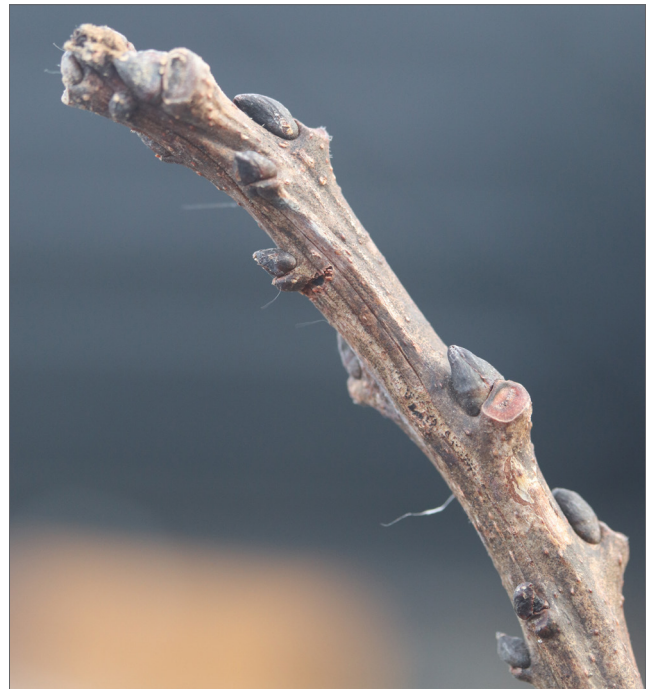


Fig. 7. The small, black, triangular buds of a thick persimmon stem.

Persimmon

• Twigs

- The twigs are thick
- **Terminal bud:** Twigs lack a true terminal bud.
- **Lateral buds:** Small, triangular, black buds. (Fig. 7)
- Leaf scars are crescent shaped and look like a smiley face.
- **Pith:** White and solid throughout.

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Photos by Chris Evans.

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