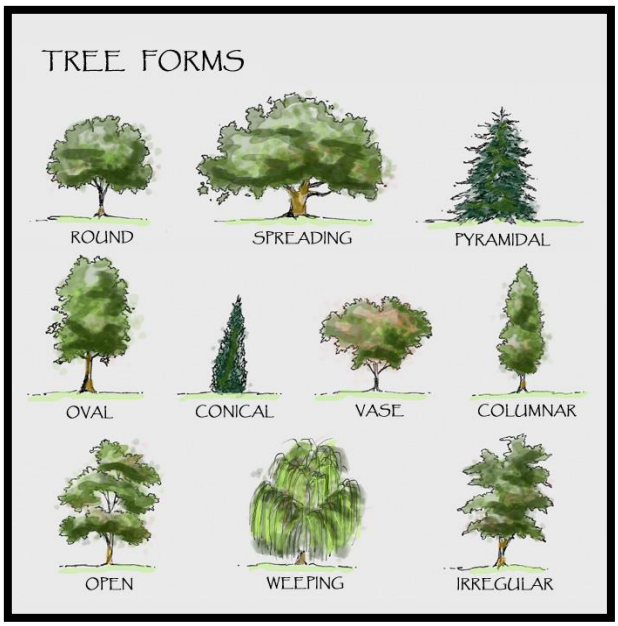
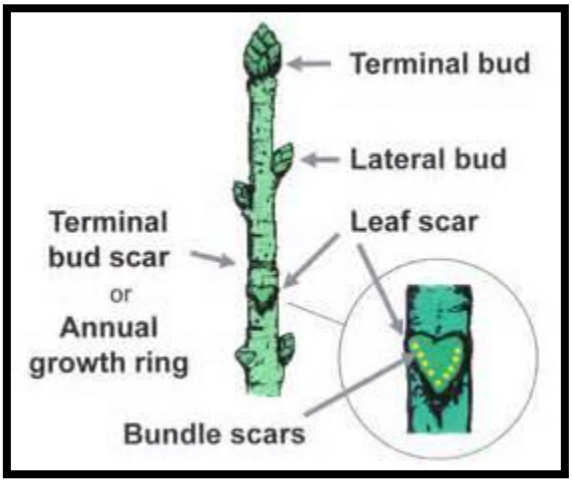
Tree Identification Basics

There are many ways you can identify trees and other plants throughout the year. By being observant you can learn to notice the characteristics below. You can use more than one characteristic to identify a tree!

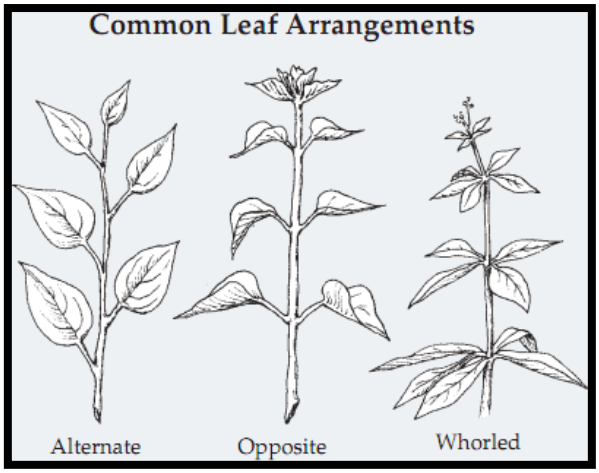
Year-round Characteristics-

- Tree Shape or Form – round, oval, conical, pyramidal, vase
- Bark – rough, smooth, peeling, lenticels
- Leaf Scar – the shape that is left behind on the twig when the leaf (petiole) is pulled off or falls off.





- Smell – the smell of the crushed leaves or scraped bark
- Branch and Leaf Arrangement – opposite, alternate, or whorled



Spring/Summer Characteristics-

- Buds – the shape of the leaf buds
- Leaves – the shape, compound or simple, veins, lobes, teeth, texture
- Flowers – size, colorful or green, catkin

Fall Characteristics-

- Seeds/Fruits – berries, nuts, drupes, cones, samara

Tree Vocabulary

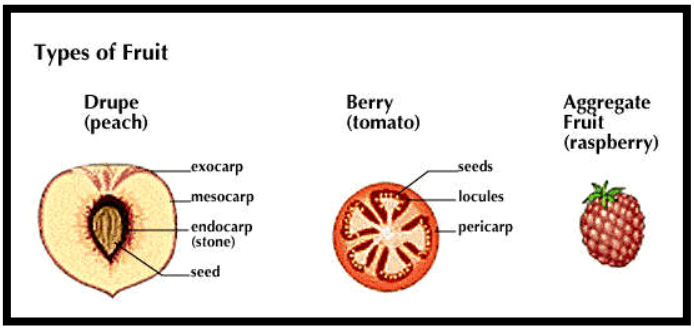
Berry- A type of fruit typically with multiple seeds throughout the flesh. Tomatoes, bananas, grapes, and pumpkins are examples.

Catkin- A string of tiny flowers, usually yellow or green. This type of flower usually spreads its pollen in the wind.

Deciduous- Trees that drop their leaves in autumn.

Drupe- A type of fruit having a single seed enclosed in a hard shell enclosed in a soft juicy flesh. Cherries and peaches are examples.

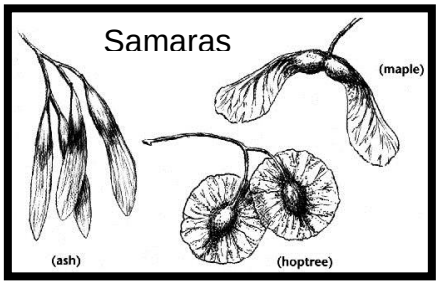
Evergreen- Trees that keep their green leaves throughout the year.



Lenticel- A pore in the bark of young trunks and branches through which air passes into the branch. Lenticels can look like tiny polka dots or tiny stripes on bark.

Margin- The leaf edges. Margin's can be smooth, wavy, lobed, toothed, or bristle tipped.

Pollination- Moving pollen from one flower to another in order to make seeds. Plants can be pollinated by insects, birds, mammals, wind, or water.



Samara- A type of fruit that has a papery tissue surrounding the seed to help disperse the seed in the wind.

Tree ID Tips!

- Look at more than one branch for leaf arrangement when determining opposite or alternate arrangement. Some branches or leaves may be broken or missing!
- Look at more than one needle cluster when counting needles. Some needles may be missing!
- Use multiple characteristics when identifying a plant. Plants can change shape, color, and texture as they age and may grow differently in different habitats.
- Many plants from other continents are planted in our gardens, neighborhoods, and cities. Some of these can escape human habitats into wild forest habitats. Your PA tree keys and field guides may not include these plants.