Most of the time the easiest way to identify a plant is to examine closely the leaf of that plant. Like fingerprints, leaves exhibit distinguishing characteristics. Once familiar with those characteristics, one can usually identify the plant. Experienced gardeners quickly tell the difference between an oak tree and a maple tree by simply examining the leaf.

When people call me with a tree problem, I generally ask them the identity of their tree. Sometimes, they struggle. They usually know if the tree is deciduous or coniferous, but knowing the exact species is where they often have difficulty.

Through the years, numerous tree identification books have been printed to assist individuals with identifying tree species. Most books direct the reader to closely examine the leaf.

I've often used these reference materials. Having now become familiar with the shape of most tree leaves, I can identify most local trees by seeing a leaf and without the use of a guide

With the advent of the smart phone and other electronic devices, numerous apps have been developed to help individual's identify a tree species. All one needs to do is open the app, take a photo of the leaf and, amazingly, the identity of the tree is made. For example, The Arbor Day Foundation has a free app that one can download on his or her smart phone called **What Tree is That**? I also have one loaded on my iPhone called **Leafsnap.** Both of these free mobile apps help to identify tree species with photos of the leaf. Also, the apps provide beautiful high-resolution images of their flowers, fruit, petiole, seeds, and bark.

I find such technology exciting; however, sometimes I question what kind of impact this software has on today's learners. Being able to identify something within a matter of a few seconds without any real effort doesn't seem to be very thought-provoking; one doesn't have to learn to use problem-solving skills.

As I mentioned earlier, most experienced gardeners know how to identify trees by simply looking at the leaves. Now that winter has arrived, the leaves are gone.

Did you know a tree can also be identified by its bark? Bark is the protective outer covering of a tree's trunk or branches. To the average onlooker, bark has few, if any, distinguishing characteristics. Many of the very field guides I made

reference to earlier have photographs of tree bark and point out the distinguishing traits of each species.

Having used an assortment of field guides and having examined many trees over the years, I've also learned, with some degree of accuracy, how to identify many local trees by looking at the bark. I can assure you, once familiar, their differences are readily apparent.

Can you identify a tree just by examining its bark?

I've photographed the bark of two mature trees found commonly growing in our area. One is labeled A, the other B. Please look closely to see if you see any differences in their appearance. Notice, one has bark that is deeply fissured with a corky type of appearance; whereas, the other has bark which appears flaking and loosely attached.

Photo A is an ash tree, and photo B is a silver maple. Perhaps you may already know their identity from their leaves; now is the perfect time to become familiar with their bark. Who needs leaves?