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Deer Foods  
Michigan State University  
Cooperative Extension Service  
Natural Science Series  
Fisheries and Wildlife Department  
November 1967  
6 pages

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## DEER FOODS

**DEER MUST EAT TO LIVE.** Good deer management plans and successful hunting are based on an understanding of the animal—his food preference and needs, where he lives in winter and summer and his way of life.

Deer are browsing animals, feeding on leaves, buds and end-twigs of *certain* plants. Many years of field studies in Michigan and elsewhere show that deer normally prefer *certain* plants and dislike or will not eat others—at least not until the best foods have been eliminated.

You must be able to identify food plants if you desire to do a good job managing land for deer. Also, you should be able to tell food plants from non-food plants to be a successful hunter. Absence or presence of certain trees and shrubs, browse lines and deer production reflect range conditions and form the basis for deer management plans. **YOU CAN'T MAKE OR EVALUATE PLANS UNLESS YOU CAN IDENTIFY FOOD PLANTS.**

Be leery of hunting where there are lots of preferred food plants and no signs of deer browsing. Probably deer aren't using the area. Where there are many deer, good food will show signs of heavy use. Your chances are best in a spot where you find enough good deer food **PLUS** plenty of deer browsing signs.

This leaflet explains what deer eat—and don't eat. It will help you to identify some *good and poor* food plants.

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Note that deer break off stems when feeding: rabbits "clip" them off.

RABBITS



DEER

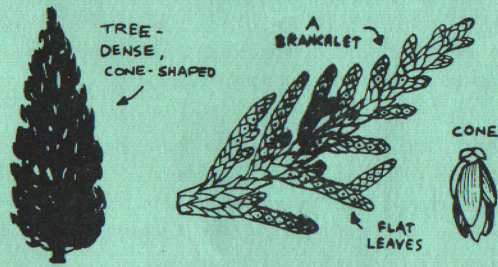
**REMEMBER** that deer food must be within reach of deer—not higher than **YOUR** shoulder—preferably lower. Remember also that trees grow. Older forests produce less deer food than young brushy areas. What was good deer country 10 to 15 years ago might be poor now.

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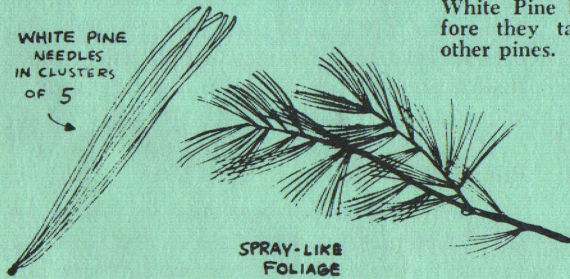
*Fisheries and Wildlife Department, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, cooperating with Michigan Department of Conservation.*

**PREFERRED FOODS** are relished by whitetails and they thrive on them.

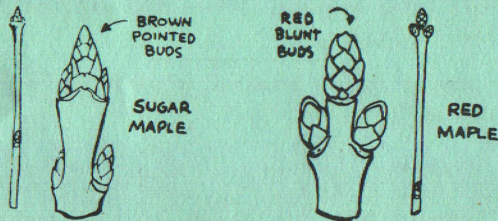
**WHITE CEDAR**—(Arbor Vitae). Evergreen with flat scale-like "leaves." Some varieties used for ornamental shrubbery. A swamp tree but it can grow on moist upland. In many areas, browsing deer have eaten practically all Cedar within reach.



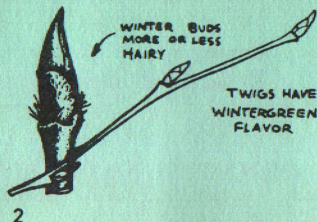
**WHITE PINE**—Evergreen. The only Michigan pine with five needles in a cluster. Young trees have smooth dark green bark. Deer will eat White Pine before they take other pines.



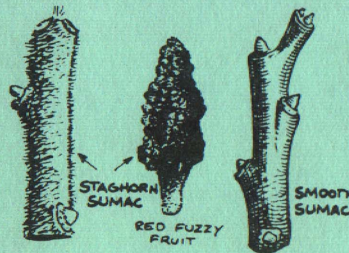
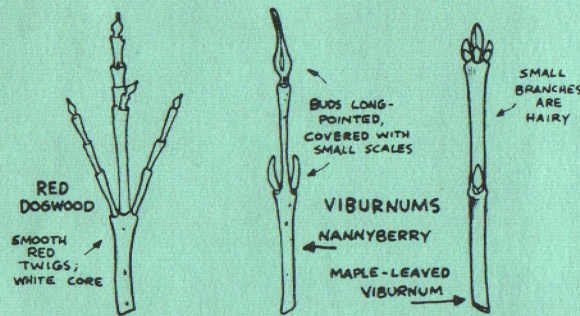
**MAPLES**—Trees with buds opposite each other. Sugar Maple has brownish or gray twigs with brown pointed buds. Red Maple has red twigs and reddish rounded buds and is better deer food.



**YELLOW BIRCH**—The bark of young trees and twigs is brownish turning yellowish-gray and curling up when older. Pointed buds. Twigs taste like wintergreen. Young Yellow Birch looks like Ironwood (a poor deer food) but Ironwood has no wintergreen taste.



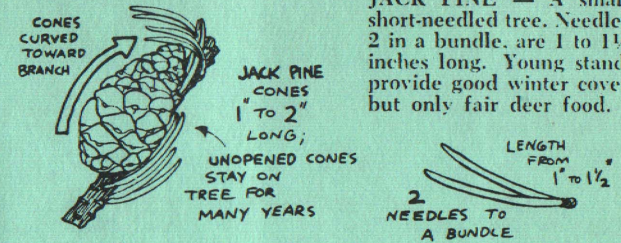
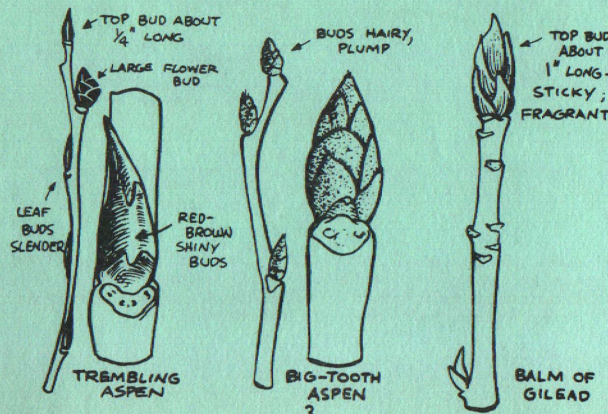
**DOGWOODS** and **VIBURNUMS**—Shrubs that generally have opposite buds like maples. Red dogwood has bright red twigs. Other species have reddish-green, brown, or gray twigs. Viburnum buds are many different shapes.



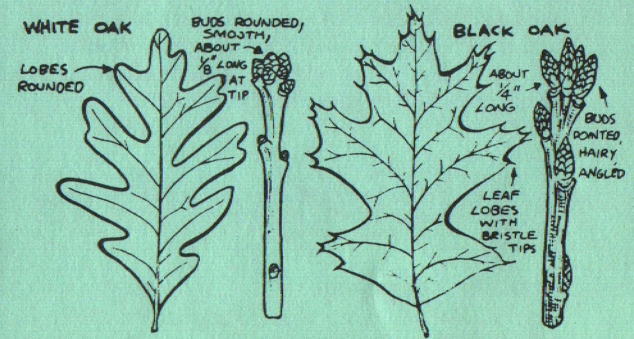
**SUMAC** — Shrub commonly found in old fields and forest openings. Heavy, stiff, brown twigs and branches. One kind is fuzzy and resembles antlers in velvet. Another kind is smooth. Bunches of fuzzy red fruit at the top of all Sumac plants.

**MEDIUM QUALITY FOOD** is second-class browse. Deer will eat these species when preferred foods are scarce.

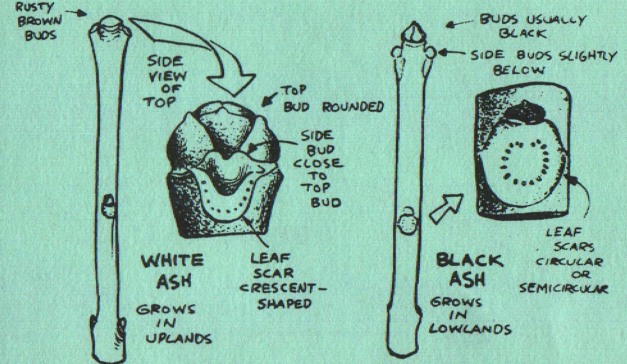
**ASPEN**—Or "popple" or "poplar" is one of the most common Michigan trees. Trembling Aspen has whitish, greenish-gray bark and long pointed shiny buds. Big-Tooth Aspen has yellow-green bark and fatter, fuzzy buds. Balm of Gilead (a poor deer food) looks similar, but has gray-green bark with big sticky end-buds and prefers to grow in wet areas.



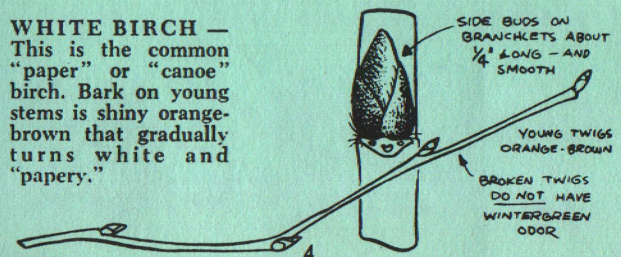
**OAKS**—Buds at ends of twigs are clustered. Leaves often hang on till spring. Acorns provide excellent deer food when available on the ground.



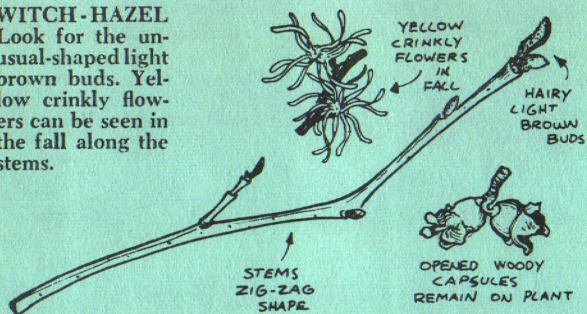
**ASH** — Green to light brownish-gray, stiff, smooth stems with opposite, dark brown and black buds. Side-buds close to end-bud. Black Ash is a swamp species. White Ash prefers upland sites.



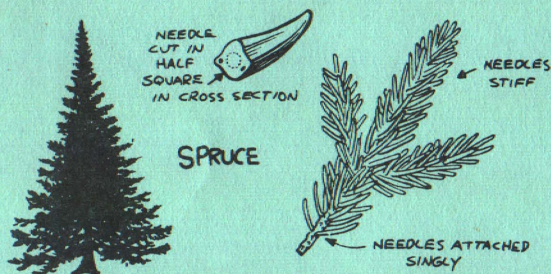
**WHITE BIRCH** — This is the common "paper" or "canoe" birch. Bark on young stems is shiny orange-brown that gradually turns white and "papery."



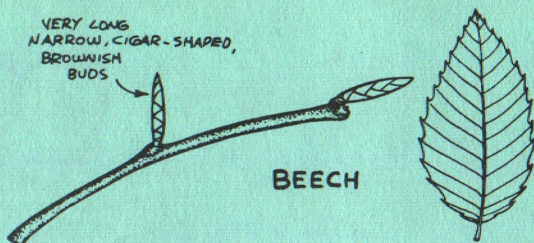
**WITCH-HAZEL**  
Look for the unusual-shaped light brown buds. Yellow crinkly flowers can be seen in the fall along the stems.



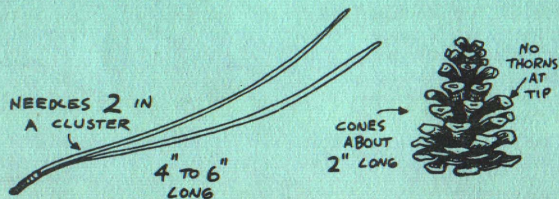
**STARVATION FOODS** are taken as a last resort—when other food is gone or unavailable. Deer will starve to death with a belly full of these foods.



**BEECH** — Light gray smooth bark. Long pointed buds. Leaves may stay on till spring.

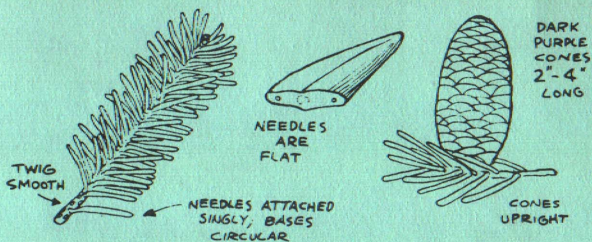


**RED PINE** — Needles 2 in a cluster, 4 to 6 inches long. Michigan's longest-needled pine and a tree that provides very little food value for deer.

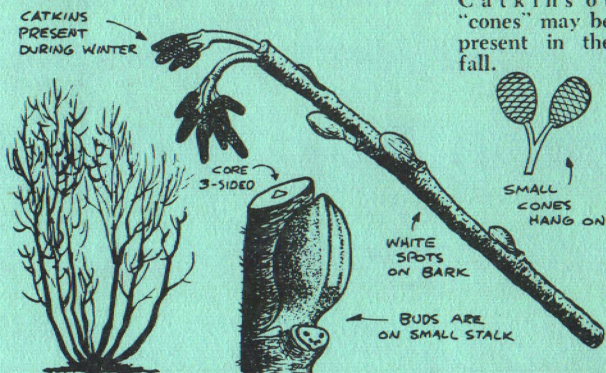


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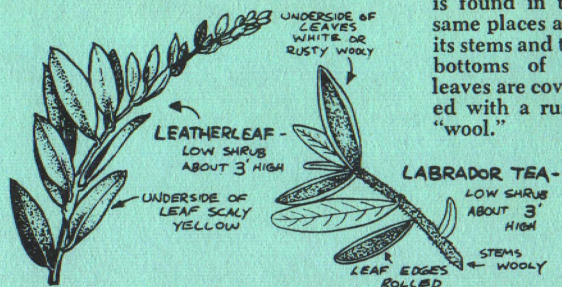
**BALSAM FIR** — Evergreen. Flat needles are 3/4 to 1 inch long. Smooth dark green bark with resin "blisters." Sticky buds at ends of twigs. A swamp species also found on moist uplands.



**TAG ALDER**—A large shrub growing in wet places. Dark greenish-brown stems covered with spots. Buds on short stalks. Catkins or "cones" may be present in the fall.



**LEATHER LEAF**—A bog shrub—broadleaf evergreen. Under sides of leaves are rough. Labrador Tea (a better deer food) is found in the same places and its stems and the bottoms of its leaves are covered with a rusty "wool."



Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U. S. Department of Agriculture. N. P. Ralston, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, E. Lansing, Mich.

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