

Arnold Arboretum Seasonal Guide



Explore the Diversity of the Living Collection

Fruits of Autumn



From the bright red winterberries, to the spiky globes of the sweet gum, to the rattling pods of the honeylocust, there are as many different fruits as there are plants. The diversity of fruit in the Arboretum naturally attracts a variety of bird and animal life. With fewer leaves on the trees, fall and winter are great times to scout for colorful and unusual fruits, and to marvel at the wildlife that turns our collections into a dinner table. After all, as much as animals rely on fruits for food, trees rely on animals to spread their seed.

1. Magnolia (*Magnolia* spp.)

- Aggregate (multiple fruits from a single flower)
- 2" to 6" cone-like structure, turning pink, orange, or red to brown as red to orange seeds are released

Magnolia seeds, another favorite of birds, ripen about mid-September. Seeds are contained in chambers within colorful cones. At ripening, the chambers open and the seeds emerge and dangle on slender cords called suspensors. Eastern kingbirds, mockingbirds, robins, wood thrushes, red-eyed vireos, and starlings all feed from the ripe fruits while they are still on the tree. Mice, moles, and voles eat the seeds that fall to the ground.



2. Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata* f. *chrysocarpa*)

- Drupe (a berry-like fruit with just one seed)
- ¼" to ½" diameter, bright red or orange when ripe

Winterberry fruits ripen in September and persist well after the leaves are shed. Over forty species of birds are known to eat the fruit, including brown thrashers, gray catbirds, mockingbirds and robins. The dense branching also provides birds with shelter, cover, and nesting spots. Birds tend to leave the fruits until late in the winter as they need to soften and, perhaps, sweeten. This example has orange berries, but red is more common.



3. Honeylocust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*)

- Legume (pod-like fruit splitting open along both edges)
- 8" to 12" long pod, turning a rich reddish brown when ripe, containing multiple seeds

Generally honeylocust pods hang on to the tree until strong winter winds carry them away. Crows have figured out a way to get at the nutritious seeds: perching in a tree they pull off the pods, then hold the pods between their feet and tear them apart to eat the seeds.



4. Apple and crabapple (*Malus* spp.)

- Pome (a fleshy fruit with a core of hard seeds that develops from the flower tube instead of the ovary)
- ¼" to 2" diameter, shades of purple, green, red, brown, and yellow, containing 5 seeds

Apples and crabapples provide more food for birds, over a longer period of time, than any other genus in the Arboretum. Many hold their fruits into winter when food supplies from other trees become scarce. Then, flocks of cedar waxwings, cowbirds, robins, blue jays, and starlings are a common sight, pecking through the pulp to eat the seeds. When the pulp falls to the ground it is eaten by pigeons, pheasants, and rabbits.



5. Common persimmon (*Diospyros virginiana*)

- Berry (fleshy fruit with multiple seeds)
- 1-1½" diameter, pale orange when ripe, containing 3-8 flat brown seeds

In Greek, "diospyros" means "food of the gods." In fact, the Asian variety, *D. kaki*, is probably eaten by more people on a regular basis than any other fruit in the world (for example, it is eaten by over one billion people in Asia). Though nearly inedible while ripening, persimmon fruits become extremely sweet just before rotting. Many animals feed on the fruit once it drops to the ground, including turkeys, quail, opossums, raccoons, skunks, and deer.



6. Sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*)

- Head of capsules (dry fruits that split open)
- 1½" diameter spiky ball, turning brown when ripe, containing multiple seeds

Monkey ball, bommyknocker, gumball, and conkleberry are just a few of the fanciful names that have been given to this unusual fruit. The forty-five to sixty holes on a mature sweet gum ball are the empty spaces left once the fruits have dried and released their tiny seeds. Each hole contained one or two seeds that are quickly eaten by finches and sparrows, turkeys, and mourning doves.

7. White spruce (*Picea glauca*)

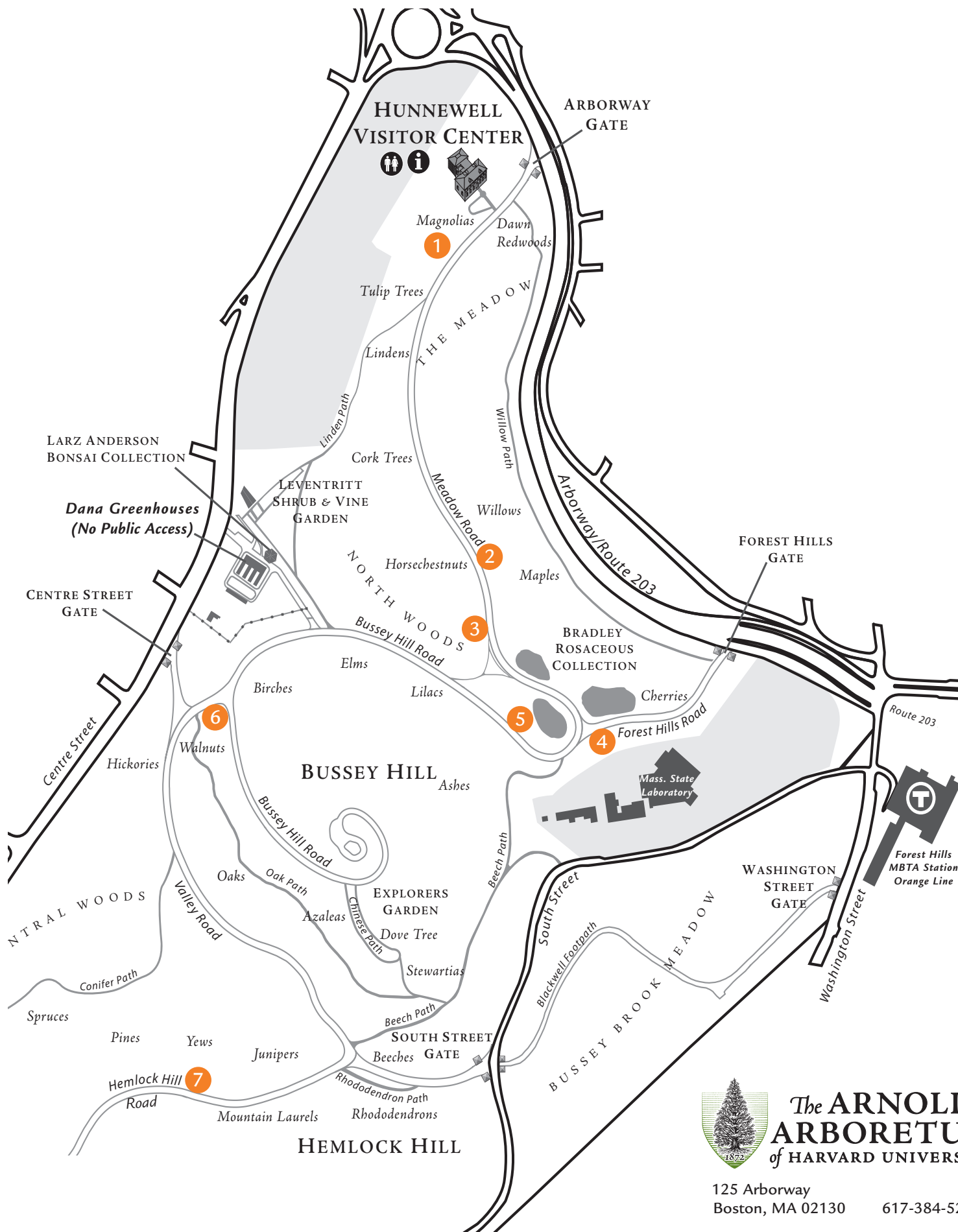
- Cone (woody scales arranged around a central axis)
- 1 to 2 ½" long, turning brown when ripe

Though conifers lack the flowers that precede fruits, cones are still considered to be a conifer's "fruit." The seeds are protected as they develop because the unripe cone stays closed. Once fully ripe, the cone scales open and release the winged seeds. During some winters, birds like white-winged crossbills and pine siskins will migrate here from their northern ranges to feed on spruce and other conifer seeds. Crossbills have a wonderfully adapted beak that enables the bird to pry open unripe cones and extract the seeds.



The Arnold Arboretum provides a sanctuary for birds and other small wildlife. Birds who come in autumn find few enemies and stay to feed on the continuing progression of ripening fruits. Feeders on the south side of the Hunnewell Building offer additional food in winter and delightful bird-watching.





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