

## TREE OF THE MONTH – September 2011

### River Birch (*Betula nigra* ‘Heritage’)

Something is killing birch trees in Vancouver. All over town, you will see Himalayan, silver, and European birches with dead, leafless, spindly branches at the top of their crowns.

The culprit is not a disease or a fungus, but an insect. The bronze birch borer (*Agrilus anxius*), a native beetle, preys on injured, sick and stressed birches and poplars, laying eggs in damaged tree tissue. Once hatched the larvae tunnel beneath the bark and feed, destroying the vascular system that transports water and nutrients. When the larvae develop into adult beetles, they lay eggs on the tree, repeating the cycle of destruction from year to year until the tree finally dies.

What provoked this widespread attack on our birches? Birches require a lot of moisture. In the long, hot summer of 2006, British Columbia was hit by a drought, which stressed and damaged mature birch trees all across the lower mainland, allowing the borer to infest many trees and spread.

At VanDusen, many of our birches, particularly the Himalayan birch (*Betula utilis* var. *jacquemontii*), have been affected and are being removed over the next few years. To replace them, we have selected *Betula nigra* ‘Heritage’, a river birch cultivar resistant to the birch borer - our tree of the month for September.

*Betula nigra* is native to eastern United States. ‘Heritage’ was discovered growing in Missouri in the 1970s. Its outer bark, in shades of brown and cinnamon, peels to reveal a pale salmon to beige inner bark. A good substitute for the beautiful but highly susceptible white-barked species of birch that we love to use in the landscape, ‘Heritage’ is also resistant to most of the diseases and pests that plague other birches. It can also grow in a variety of soil conditions, from dry to waterlogged.

You can find our little grove of ‘Heritage’ river birches on the northern shore of Heather Pond, near Bill Reid’s *Lootas* canoe.