

American Bladdernut (*Staphylea trifolia*)

The American Bladdernut is an attractive small understory tree, sometimes considered a tall shrub, which is native to eastern North America from Minnesota and southern Ontario, south to Louisiana and Florida.

Although typically growing 6 to 12 feet high, this deciduous tree can reach 20 feet. It has a loose irregular branch structure and smooth gray bark that becomes fissured with age. The twigs are green to chocolate brown with white stripes and rings at the nodes.

The American Bladdernut can be identified by its leaves which are opposite, palmately compound with three leaflets. Other native shrubs/small trees have alternate leaves, simple leaves, or compound leaves with more leaflets. The Bladdernut's leaflets are dark green, broadly ovate with a long-pointed tip, 2-4 inches long, finely toothed and pubescent (hairy) on the underside. The foliage remains green late into autumn eventually turning a pale yellow.

In late spring, the American Bladdernut produces small, bell-shaped white flowers with five petals and protruding stamens. These flowers droop downward abundantly on 1 to 2 inch panicles in beautiful nodding clusters.

By mid-June, the flowers give way to highly distinctive 3- pointed, inflated, bladder-like (thus the name) seed capsules (1-3" long). These papery capsules dry out and turn brown in late summer. Inside, 1-4 pale brown, shiny seeds eventually become loose and rattle in the wind. The showy seed capsules add interest to the autumn landscape and are often used in dried flower arrangements.

In the wild, American Bladdernut is found in moist mesic woodlands, floodplain woodlands, riverbanks, and thickets along with Sycamores, Silver Maple, Sugar Maple, or American Basswood. The flowers provide nectar and pollen to insects and bees, including honeybees and bumblebees. Grouse use the foliage for cover, and squirrels have been known to eat the nuts. Deer tend to leave this plant alone.

The American Bladdernut is not only decorative with its white flowers in spring and interesting capsules, but responds well to clipping. Thus, it is an excellent native choice for landscape borders or trained as a small tree. It is also a good understory tree in woodland gardens or next to patio seating. Easy to grow, Bladdernuts tolerate a wide variety of soils, though prefers well-drained moist soils, part to full shade, and higher pH soil. Propagation is by seeds or cuttings. Prune in early spring to shape or maintain as a small tree.

Its scientific name *Staphylea* is from a Greek phrase meaning "cluster of grapes" referring to the drooping flowers. *Trifolia* refers to the three leaflets.

More information and photos available at:

<http://plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=STTR>

<http://www.duke.edu/~cwcook/trees/sttr.html>

<http://www.illinoiswildflowers.info/trees/plants/bladdernut.html>