

# The Elegant Birk's o' Waterford Valley

Alexander Robertson

On a warm, sunny day in late October, I invited a tree and garden enthusiast and Rosie, his lively English setter, for a tree-spotting stroll along the railway track from Corpus Christi to MIII Lane in St. John's. The Railway was started in 1881 and its 550 miles across Newfoundland completed in 1897. It closed in 1988 and the most of its tracks are dedicated to a T'Railway for walking, cycles, and snowmobiles. Until 1988, the banks of the was kept clean of trees and shrubs most with chemical arboricides; so most of the trees along this beautiful walk are about 10-15 years old.



The only other time he walked the trail was about 50 years ago, when his father had taken him in search of saplings to plant in the garden. Those trees in his father's garden have since grown quite tall. By a coincidence of sorts, I was born in Bruach (Gaelic for farm-on-the-hill), between Loch Katrine and Loch Lomond where most of the mountain landscape was bereft of trees much in early 18<sup>th</sup> century as shown on military maps.

The ancient shieling of Bruach is gone, but the six spruce and pine trees planted by my father - one for each sibling mark - marks the site of the ancient croft. In a tangible way, the tree-planting of our parents echoed the advice of the Laird o' Drumbiedykes in Sir Walter Scott's novel Guy Mannering, who said, "*Ye may aye be plantin' a tree. Jock. It will be growing when ye're sleepin'.*"



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Waterford Manor c1930



Waterford Manor 2008

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My colleague recalls there being very little in the way of trees in the lower Waterford Valley 50 years ago. In fact, in my book *Water Powered Sawmills of Newfoundland*, there is a photograph of the intake of the Waterford Bridge Mill, on Mill Lane, which shows a large mansion, which is still there, set in a virtually treeless landscape. There is an even more graphic photograph hanging in the Waterford Manor showing the whole valley bereft of trees in an age when the occupants of



Beaconsfield House would have had a clear view of the Narrows. Today, of course, the lower Waterford Valley is one of the most beautifully treed urban landscapes in the country — made all the more so by the cleanup of the river by **Friends and Lobbyists of the Waterford River**.

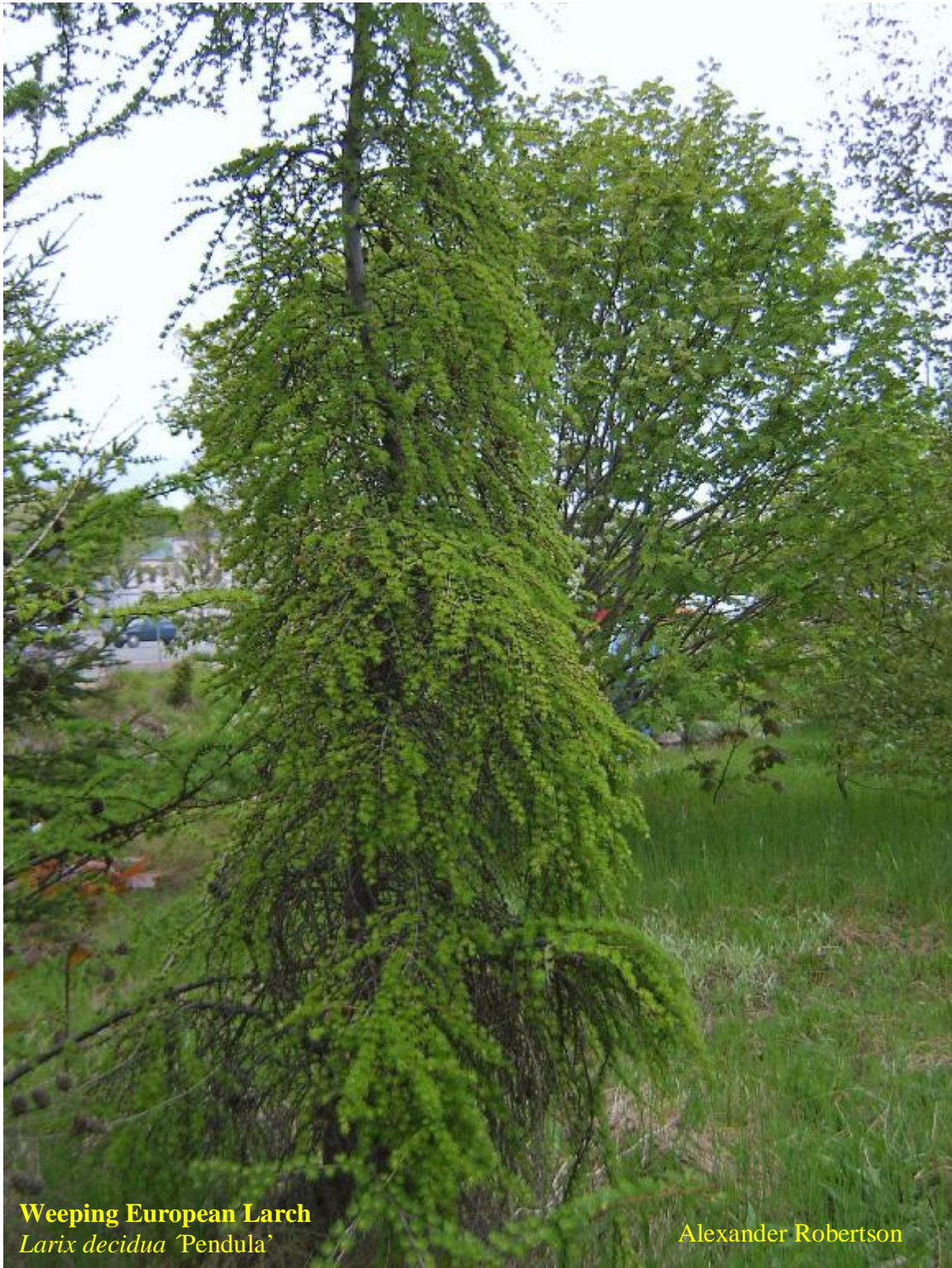
There are about 30-40 native and exotic tree species (and roughly 200 shrub species) growing within sight of the railway track in the vicinity of Syme's Bridge. Nearly all of the tree species have become naturalized.

We hardly noticed the original planted stock. Of the native species, natural regeneration of native red maple (*acer rubrum*) is no great surprise. Many exotic species are also naturally colonizing the valley, notably the service tree (*sorbus domesticus*), Norway Maples (*Acer platanoides*) and the odd sugar maple (*acer saccharum*) and some green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*) and European ash (*fraxinus excelsior*).





Along the banks of the Waterford River there are many species of trees. Among the conifers the most interesting is undoubtedly the Weeping European larch (*Larix deciduas* ‘**pendula**’) that was recently planted at the beginning of the trail next to the dockyards.



**Weeping European Larch**  
*Larix decidua* 'Pendula'

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**Weeping European Larch**  
*Larix decidua* 'Pendula'

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## The Signature Tree

But it is the dominance of the pioneering birch that is most surprising of all. Not only have they become the signature tree in the lower Waterford Valley, but the natural cross-breeding between a European species and native birches have produced attractive, elegant hybrids.

These conspicuous new hybrids have naturally regenerated to form groves along the railway track and on the flood plain. It is not an exaggeration to say that these hybrids occur nowhere else in the world. Hybridization among Newfoundland birches, resulting in several distinctive types or races of birches, is not unusual. Among the more unusual hybrids is a short birch tree I found in Green Garden Valley near Trout River some years ago. It has small leaves like a diminutive form of the service tree (*Sorbus domestica*).



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On the exotic side of the family, the European silver birch (*betula pendula*). So far as I can tell, the silver birch in St. John's was introduced around the early 1940s. Some of the best specimens grow on Pine Bud Avenue, Forest Road and Waterford Bridge Road, and on the riverbank at the bottom of Mill Lane.

At least a half dozen varieties of silver birch, notably the strongly weeping type, are popular landscape trees. In fact, for well more than 100 years the many varieties of a European silver birch has ranked highly among them as the all-time Favourite Park, garden and street trees in many parts of the world.



On the native side, parents of the hybrids of the family are predominantly mountain paper birch (*Betula x cordifolia*), itself considered by some to be a cross between yellow birch (*Betula lutea*) and paper birch (*B. papyrifera*).

But there is also a kind of cherry-bark birch with leathery leaves which, when young and leafless, are hard to spot among other groves. Perhaps this related to the river birch (*Betula nigra*) of eastern USA and southern Canada. The third native parent is the yellow birch (*Betula lutea*). Colloquially known as witch hazel to Newfoundlanders, it is a newcomer to the lower Waterford valley, although it was probably common in the area a century or two ago along with red maple. In fact, there are natural habitats of both yellow birch and red maple quite close to St. John's. However, we'll leave it to the biotechnologists to sort out the familial DNA of the complex hybridization of Waterford birches. In the meantime, we can stroll among them and enjoy their cheerful disposition and marvel at their variety.



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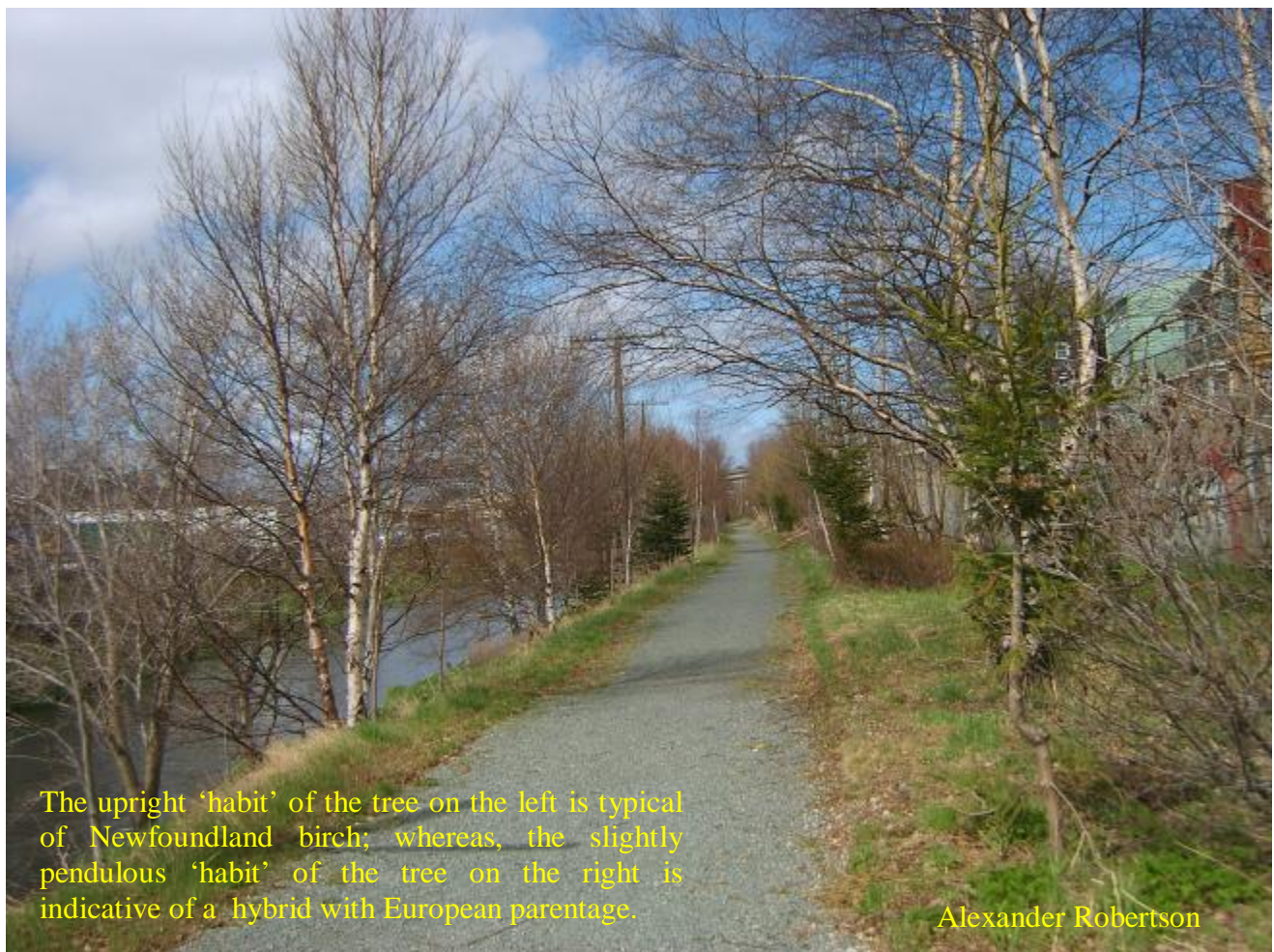


## Pleasant Tapestry

Few trees, other than the birch, can generate such a pleasant, free-flowing, intricate tapestry of landscape and memory. Somehow, my colleague managed to link the complexities of natural hybridization between the European silver birch and native birches to the achievements of the *creme de la creme* of politics, law, commerce, arts and science, whose gardens the birches are colonizing.

Indeed it was from the silver birches (*birks* in Scots) that I acquired the habit of linking landscape and culture as a tool for swamping the dregs that afflicted me as a young forestry worker confined to toil on the steep, sodden, misty, midge-infested braes of the Scottish Highlands. The Calvinistic creed “There’s nae pleasure in life, withoot hard wark and “misery” was as good as it got in those post-war days and was surely the inspiration behind auld Drumbydikes’ comment on wisdom in tree-planting.

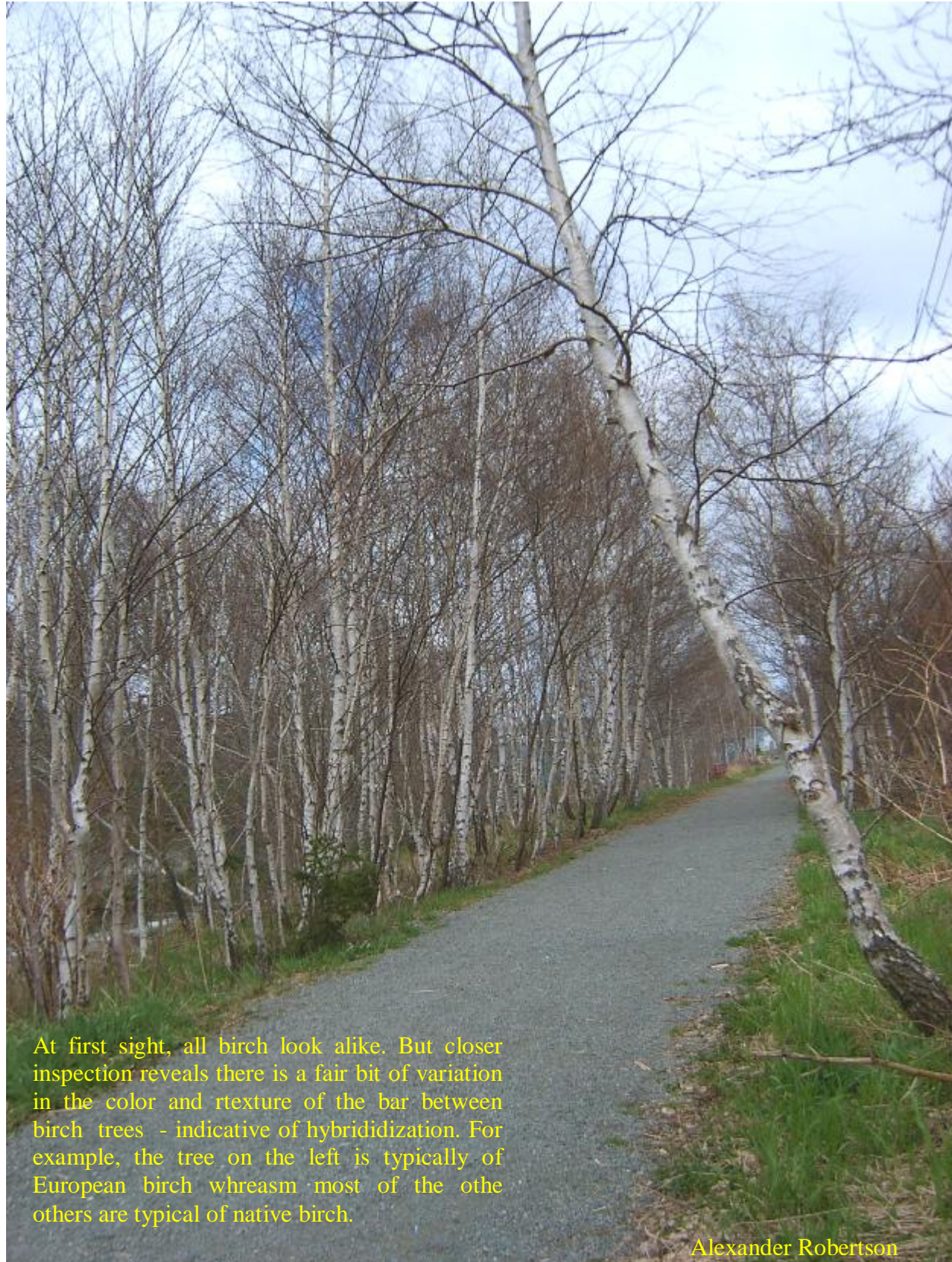
How decent it is of the beautiful and elegant birks o’ Waterford to multiply themselves without any hard spade work on our part. I trust the owners in whose gardens they are colonizing will recognize, appreciate and preserve these dendrological gems.



The upright ‘habit’ of the tree on the left is typical of Newfoundland birch; whereas, the slightly pendulous ‘habit’ of the tree on the right is indicative of a hybrid with European parentage.

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At first sight, all birch look alike. But closer inspection reveals there is a fair bit of variation in the color and texture of the bark between birch trees - indicative of hybridization. For example, the tree on the left is typically of European birch whereas most of the others are typical of native birch.

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The color and texture of the birch trunk in the foreground is typical of a Newfoundland birch; whereas, the tree in trunk in the background is typical of a European birch.

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In the case we have two trunks which appear to be intermediat between Newfoundland and European birches, respectively; althe the one in the foreground seems more like European; while the one behind it is more like a Newfoundland birch

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The slender, weakly pendulous form of this birch obviously has European parentage.

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The slender, weakly pendulous form of this birch obviously has European parentage much like the weeping birch *Betula pendula* f. *gracilis* which have been planted in older parts of St. John's

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The birch in the foreground is a typical Newfoundland birch (*Betula x cordifolia*) while the one in the background is of European descent, although it does not have the characteristic weeping habit of *Betula pendula*,

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A close-up view of the typical Newfoundland birch (*Betula x cordifolia*) in the foreground and the European x Newfoundland hybrid in the background.

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A large leaves of the typical Newfoundland birch (*Betula x cordifolia*) compared to the smaller leaves of a European x Newfoundland hybrid in the background.

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