

Yellowbud Hickory HARVESTER'S HANDBOOK



KTCC.COOP

OVERVIEW

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

This handbook is designed to walk you through every step of becoming a yellowbud hickory harvester for Keystone Tree Crops Cooperative (KTCC). Whether you are brand new to nut harvesting or already familiar with the process, this handbook will offer clear instructions, helpful visuals, and practical tips to support you along the way.

This is a living document. As we learn more and grow together, we'll update this handbook to reflect what's working best in the field. Thank you for joining the tree-crop movement. We can't wait to work with you.

Contact us at harvest@ktcc.coop if you have any questions.

YELLOWBUD HICKORY HARVEST PROCESS OVERVIEW



**SIMPLE
ONBOARDING**

Fill out the
simple intake
form and get
ready to
harvest



**FIND A
SPOT**

Use our
open-access
maps to
locate nearby
trees.



**HARVEST
NUTS**

Harness your
inner squirrel
and harvest
nuts.



**DELIVER
TO KTCC**

Deliver your
hickory nuts to a
nearby
aggregation
point.



**GET
PAID**

KTCC pays a
competitive
price per
gallon of
nuts!

OVERVIEW

HARVESTER'S CHECKLIST

Please review the handbook in full before using this convenient checklist

Timing

- Scout trees in August to assess yield
- Start visiting harvest sites in early September
- Peak harvest runs mid-September to early November
- Ignore nuts dropped in July/August (usually aborted/bad)

Choosing Trees

- Track which trees produce heavily year to year
- Prefer bigger trees and bigger nuts for efficiency. Quality is also important.

Choosing Sites

- Clear understory (yards, parks, mowed grass, clear forest floor)
- Avoid areas with heavy squirrel pressure (close to wood edges)
- Get permission from landowners before harvesting

Harvesting Methods

Hand Harvesting

- Bucket, tub, or wide-opening bin
- Burlap/onion sacks for storage and transport
- Option of raking to pile nuts
- Sort bad nuts immediately while harvesting

Tool Harvesting

- Try Nut Wizard or Bag-a-nut (requires clear understory)
- Be prepared to remove debris and bad nuts before or after harvesting

Good Nuts vs Bad Nuts

Good Nuts

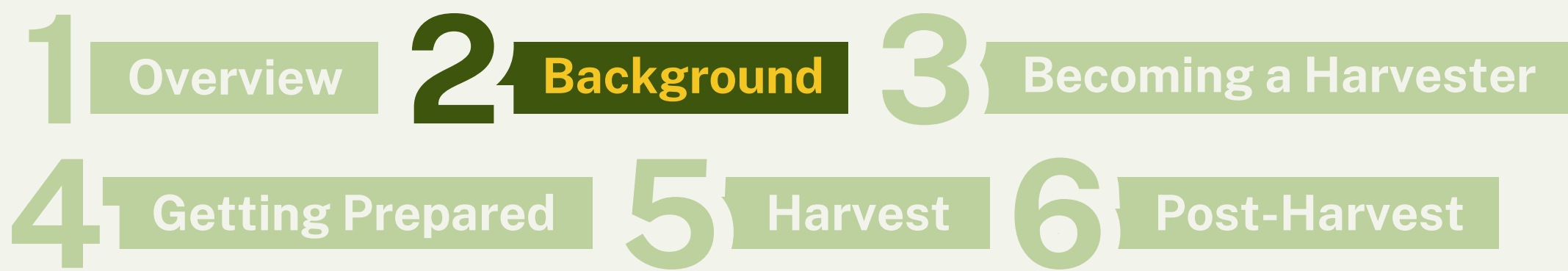
- Fresh, green husks
- Shell intact, no cracks
- No visible weevil hole

Bad Nuts

- Husk sticks tightly to nut
- Feels light, dry, or decomposed
- Weevil hole or cracks in shell
- Old, dark, or from July/August drop

Post-Harvest Handling

- Deliver nuts within 5-7 days after harvest
- If storing for 1-2 weeks: keep in onion sacks or crates with airflow, store out of sun, protect from rodents
- For storage beyond 2 weeks: contact KTCC for drying/curing guidance



BACKGROUND

WHY YELLOWBUD HICKORY?

Yellowbud hickory, also known as bittersweet hickory (*Carya cordiformis*) is a resilient, abundant, native tree that produces nuts rich in oil. It has the largest range of any tree in the walnut family in North America, and it's drought and flood tolerant.

Hickory oil is a flavorful, nutrient-rich oil pressed from Yellowbud hickory nuts. With a mild, buttery taste and high smoke point, it's ideal for sautéing, baking, or dressings. The nuts themselves are bitter, but their oil is smooth and tannin-free. Unlike most industrial oils, it comes from perennial systems that rebuild soil, store carbon, and support wildlife.

Hickories have been part of Eastern North American foodways for millennia-- Indigenous communities use them for food and medicine, processing them into hickory milk and oil as everyday staples. As agriculture shifted to capital-intensive systems, this legacy has become less common. Reviving hickory oil today reconnects us to that history while fostering a resilient, tree-based food future.

ABOUT KTCC

Keystone Tree Crops Cooperative (KTCC) is a grower- and harvester-led cooperative building a perennial, tree-based food economy in the Mid-Atlantic. We focus on native and regionally adapted tree crops—like hickories, chestnuts, and hazelnuts—that bring both ecological and economic value. Trees feed, fuel, and sustain us while stabilizing soil, sequestering carbon, and creating habitat. By uniting growers, gatherers, processors, distributors, and consumers, KTCC works to strengthen both our food systems and our landscapes. We are guided by values of bioregionalism, empowerment, equity, education, and right livelihood. At KTCC, we love trees and invite you to help grow a resilient future with us.



BECOMING A HARVESTER

INTEREST FORM

Please fill out [this interest form](#). It will take approximately three minutes to complete. This information is collected to help organize our harvesting processes and will not be shared without your consent. After you fill out the form, we will reach out to you as soon as possible. You can then coordinate with your KTCC point of contact around pricing, aggregation drop offs, harvesting questions, and more.

If you don't hear back from us soon, send us an email at harvest@ktcc.coop.

If you are interested in being a long term hickory harvester with KTCC, consider becoming a member. Contact us at membership@ktcc.coop if interested.

[Follow This Link to Open: INTEREST FORM](#)

GETTING PREPARED

The first thing to do before harvesting is to identify your harvest spots. You can either locate your own trees in your area, or use KTCC's hickory map. Not all trees or sites are created equal. This section will help you find good sites for an efficient harvest.

KTCC'S HICKORY MAP

ArcGIS

KTCC uses arcGIS to track the location of hickory trees for harvest. To view the map, click [here](#).

Use this map to plan the location of your next harvest. Use a browser on your phone or download the map for easy in-field viewing. You do not need to download an app to view the map.

[View Map](#)

[Download Survey123
on Apple App Store](#)

[Download Survey123 on
Android Google Play Store](#)

Survey123

KTCC harvesters will use Survey123 to add the location of hickory trees that are not yet identified on the map.

The Hickory Tree Map is a dynamic map that grows every day with the support and input from community members and explorers like you.

To access the surveys, follow these simple steps.

1. Download Survey123 using the appropriate download link
2. Open the app
3. Click "Continue without signing in" (below two main login options)
4. Scan this QR code
5. This only needs to be done once. After that, the survey will remain on your home-page for easier use.



GETTING PREPARED

For more information, check out [this guide](#) from Levi Geyer of Fancy Twig Farm.

IDENTIFYING YELLOWBUD HICKORY

Identifying yellowbud hickory trees can seem tricky at first, but once you're able to identify a few, you will start seeing them everywhere! They can be found in a variety of locations, sometimes abundant along river flood plains, upland forest, or field edges.

Leaf: Alternate on stem, pinnately compound with 7-11 leaflets, finely toothed margins, 6-10 inches in length, golden yellow in autumn

Bark: Granite-gray, Interwoven pattern, not shaggy like other hickory species. The base of tree sometimes flares out.

Buds: Sulphur yellow, often come to a point

Husk: vegetative material outside of the nut, green to yellow to brown, thin, remains on the nut after dropping, four sections with ridges that come to a pointed tip

Nuts: Thin shelled, can be the diameter of a nickel to a half dollar, bitter tasting



GETTING PREPARED

To make harvesting worthwhile, choose good trees and good sites. Start scouting in August, when nuts become visible, to identify the most productive trees before harvest. With experience, you'll learn to spot high- vs. low-yield trees.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD TREE?

- Not all trees produce equally—some yield far more than others.
- Track the most productive trees and return to them each year.
- Some trees are more susceptible to weevils or produce under-developed nuts (see “Bad Nuts” in “Harvest”).
- Yields vary from year to year.
- Larger trees generally produce more nuts.
- Bigger nuts improve efficiency, though size isn't everything. Quality is more important.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD SITE?

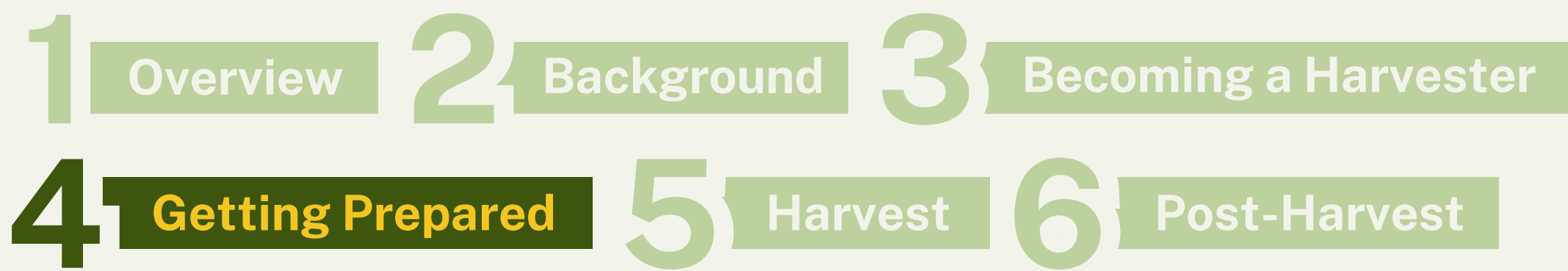
A productive tree on a poor site won't yield an efficient harvest. Look for:

- Clear understory: Mowed grass, parks, or open forest floors make collection easy with tools like nut wizards or bag-a-nuts.
- Low predation: Trees away from forest edges can face less squirrel pressure, though competition varies by location year to year. Some urban settings can have high squirrel populations.
- Permission: Always get approval from landowners; check foraging rules in public or conservation lands.

Examples of potential good sites:

- Mowed yards
- Parks
- Golf courses
- University campuses
- Field edges
- Pasture (watch out for manure!)
- Older forest with a clear understory





GETTING PREPARED

ENSURE ACCESS TO TREES

Having permission to harvest is essential. If you find a particularly good tree on private property, it is always worth asking for permission before you harvest even if there're loads of nuts on the ground. It's tempting, but you risk being permanently banned from the site.

If you're harvesting on public land, look up the rules around foraging. Permission usually isn't needed for municipal parks such as city parks, but foraging for commercial purposes is not permitted in PA state parks, state forests, and state game lands. Other public lands, such as county parks, vary between jurisdictions, so it's best to check regulations or contact the park prior to harvesting

Tips and tricks when talking to land owners:

- Smile! And be respectful.
- If they seem confused as to why you want to harvest their yellowbud hickories, tell them about how cool hickory oil is!
- Get their phone number so that you can communicate in the future
- If they're not home, leave a note with your name and number.

MAKE A POST-HARVEST PLAN

The nuts need to be delivered to one of KTCC's convenient aggregation points after harvest. Before you head to the field, contact your aggregation point coordinator to discuss their upcoming availability. If your aggregation point coordinator is available, you may want to drop off the nuts on the same day as your harvest. Depending on the size of your harvest, storing nuts (properly) on your own may be difficult. More information on storing nuts will be addressed in the Post-Harvest section.

HARVEST

WHEN SHOULD I START HARVESTING?

Yellowbud hickory harvest runs from **mid-September to early November**, sometimes going into December with low wildlife pressure. Drop timing varies by tree and year, but each tree is usually consistent relative to others (early, mid, or late season). Begin checking sites in early September.

Note: Nuts on the ground in August are usually aborted due to weevils or other issues. These often have little to no nut meat, tough husks, or grubs inside. You could rake them aside before the main nut drop to make harvesting easier later.

WATCH THESE HELPFUL VIDEOS!



- Yellowbud Harvest 101
- [Yellowbud \(aka bitternut\) Hickory - the oil tree - picking up nuts](#)
- [Bitternut Hickory - Awesome Tree](#)

HOW CAN I HARVEST EFFICIENTLY?

Choose good trees and sites to make harvesting worthwhile. Scout in August, when nuts are visible, to identify high-yield trees before harvest. With experience, you'll learn to spot productive trees. It is often worth returning to the same tree multiple times in a harvest season if it's producing heavily and if there's squirrel pressure.

Hickories produce on mast cycles. Harvest heavily in abundant years for best efficiency. In off years, yields are lower and competition with squirrels is higher, though some trees may still produce well.

Aim for a **harvest rate of about 5 gallons per hour**, and track your time to improve efficiency.

HARVEST

HOW DO I HARVEST?

It depends on the site and the person. Even Sam Thayer and Levi Geyer—the country’s current largest hickory oil producers—still find hand harvesting most efficient. Try different tools to see what works best for you.

Hand Harvesting

Supplies: bucket, tub/bin, burlap/onion sacks, rake

- Requires speed and a sharp eye. Sort bad nuts as you go and toss them aside so you don’t re-collect them.
- Some prefer raking nuts into piles and then sorting to save your back or your knees. It’s also faster for some people.
- Buckets are common, but containers with wide openings like totes allow faster tossing.
- Transfer nuts to burlap/onion sacks for efficient storage and transport.
- A throw line or large stick may be helpful to shake branches to drop nuts

Harvesting with Tools



- [Pick Up Hickory Nuts!](#)
- [Nut Wizard - Amazing tool for collecting nuts!](#)

Tools: [Nut Wizard](#) (medium size, with bucket unloader) [or Bag-a-nut](#)

- They tools can improve efficiency but they only work well with clear understories.
- They don’t allow sorting while harvesting and may collect debris and bad nuts
- Try to choose trees with a high % of good nuts when using these tools
- Clear sites of debris and bad nuts beforehand or plan to sort with the aid of winnowing and sifting.
- Using these tools in combination with a battery powered leaf blower may be helpful

HARVEST

ENSURING A QUALITY HARVEST

It's vital that you only harvest good quality nuts. KTCC inspects each delivery before accepting it. Learning to tell good nuts from bad takes practice, so try cracking open nuts with a nutcracker or even a nearby rock you suspect may be bad to test yourself. Take note that we will only purchased whole, uncracked nuts.

Yellowbud hickory nuts can be poor quality for several reasons:

- Physical damage from animals or cars
- Old nuts from the previous year: darker, decomposed
- Nuts aborted during midsummer: lighter in weight with husks that don't separate easily from the nut
- Weevils may also cause damage, though yellowbud hickory's tannins usually offer some protection. Still, certain trees are more vulnerable than others.
- Some trees have a high % of unfilled nuts that are under-developed. When harvesting from a new tree, crack around 10 nuts to check the quality.

GOOD NUT

- Fresh husks that easily separate from the shell
- Shell is fully intact. No obvious damage.
- No weevil hole
- Nut is filled with healthy nut meat

Cross section of healthy, filled nut

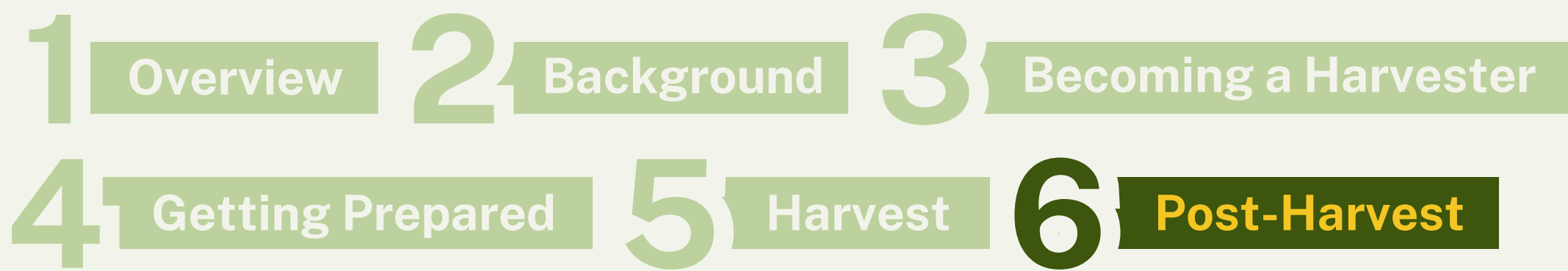


BAD NUT

- Husk doesn't easily separate from the nut
- Excessively dry and/or excessively decomposed
- Feels light in weight
- Visible weevil hole
- Obvious cracks in the shell



A weevil larvae and its exit hole



POST-HARVEST

WHAT DO I DO WITH MY NUTS?

Delivery

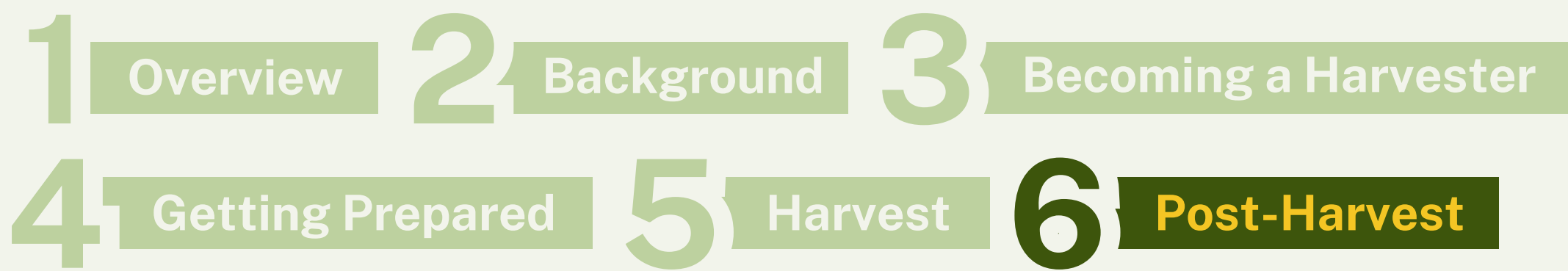
- Best option: deliver nuts directly to a KTCC aggregation point.
- Contact your coordinator before arriving to make sure they're available.

Temporary Storage

- If you can't deliver within a week, store nuts with good airflow and out of the sun.
- Use onion sacks, shelves, or crates with a fan in a garage.
- Avoid sealed buckets—husks mold in 1–2 weeks.
- Protect from rodents with traps or deterrents.

Longer Delays

- If storage exceeds 2 weeks, contact KTCC at harvest@ktcc.coop for guidance on drying, curing, and pricing options.



POST-HARVEST

AGGREGATION POINT PROCESS

Quality Assurance Test

At the aggregation point, your aggregation point coordinator will conduct a quality assurance test to determine whether or not your harvest is accepted

Weight and Recorded Harvest

Your aggregation point coordinator will weigh your delivery and record it in [this Google Form](#). Note: You will need to enter your personal information, including your address, for payment distribution.

Get Paid!

KTCC will generate an invoice to be paid within 30 days by mailed check. Make sure you check in with your KTCC coordinator about pricing at the beginning of the harvest season. KTCC pays for yellowbud hickory nuts by the gallon with different prices for husked and unhusked nuts.

THANK YOU FOR
HARVESTING WITH US!