

Quaking aspen are a visual feast

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Quaking aspen (*Populus tremuloides*) is found in more states than any other tree. While in western Oregon their presence is somewhat scarce, these beautiful, unique trees can be found growing in Oregon's upper Cascades and eastward - especially along mountain streams, in openings in the woods, and near the edges of mountain lakes and meadows.

Lovely leaves, bark

Its leaves are what make the Quaking aspen a real standout among trees. Nearly circular, the leaves are green above, and a pale silvery color below, 1 to 3 inches in diameter with small, rounded teeth. Foliage shakes in the slightest breeze (hence, the common name), and seems to shimmer in the wind. That's because the leaf stems, called petioles, are flat and are held at right angles to the leaf blade; the slightest breeze causes the leaves to quiver, flutter and dance. These trees are much loved for both their fall foliage - a brilliant gold or yellow - and for their greenish-white to cream-colored bark (the coarse vertical marks in the photo at right were made by deer).

When injured, these short-lived trees sprout from their roots. An original tree with its attached sprouts is called a "clone," - all members being genetically identical to each other. In fact, one aspen clone in Colorado is said to have 47,000 trees attached to the same root, and may even be the largest single organism in the world. And of course, the mountains of central Colorado are famous for their strikingly beautiful stands of Quaking aspen - so much so that the town of Aspen adopted the tree's name.

In Oregon, aspen are more often seen east of the Cascades; the photos here were taken in the La Grande area in October 2007. Aspen grow 20 to 60 feet tall and 1 to 2 feet in diameter. Trees grow fast, and their white trunks are noticeable at an early age. Their inner bark may be bitter to our taste buds, but it's a favorite of beavers who like to store the cuttings for winter meals.

The mountains of central Colorado are famous for their beautiful stands of Quaking aspen, and in Oregon these striking trees can often be seen east of the Cascades.

Photos by Ted Schroeder





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Fire and aspen

Fire indirectly benefits aspen trees, allowing the saplings to flourish in open sunlight in burned landscapes. Fuels are often moister in stands of quaking aspen than in surrounding forests. Quaking aspen stands often act as natural fuel breaks during wildfires, and fires sometimes bypass them.

Aspen wood is softer and lighter than most North American hardwoods. It's used most commonly in pulp products like books, newsprint, specialty papers and particle board, and is the preferred species for structural flake board. It's also well suited for furniture parts, crates, paneling – and also, as tongue depressors and ice cream sticks.

These trees propagate by seed, which may be carried more than 1,600 feet by typical (prevailing) winds, and up to several miles in high winds.

Enhances habitat

Compared to coniferous forests, stands of aspen have a rich understory of shrubs, including serviceberry, snowberry, grasses, sedges, and wildflowers. Animals attracted to aspen and its understory species include black bears, cottontails, porcupine, beaver, and many species of birds including grouse and quail. This rich structural habitat diversity, as well as the tree's own bark, buds and foliage, provide excellent forage for wildlife.

Growing tips

Quaking aspen are less happy in extremely high temperatures but they are tolerant of the cold. They grow best in moist, well-drained fertile soils with full sun. Avoid planting near water or sewer lines, as the roots will naturally seek these out.

Plenty of water and some added fertilizer will improve their growth and survival. If soils are heavy clay, rocky or very sandy, add compost or other materials to the planting spot. 🌲



More about Quaking aspen . . .

Name: *Populus*, from the Latin for “poplar,” *tremuloides*, from the Latin, *tremulus*, “shaking, trembling, quivering.”

Distribution: Alaska to Newfoundland, south to Minnesota, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania and New Jersey in the East; south throughout the western states to the mountains of northern Mexico. The most widely distributed tree in North America.

Cultural lore: Much excitement has been generated about carvings made by Basque shepherders on these trees in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Compared to other trees aspen generally live a short life (80-120 years), but carvings on these trees can still be found in Oregon, Idaho, Nevada, California, Colorado and Wyoming.

Called “arborglyphs,” these light carvings are a unique mix of folk art and historical documentation. Whether writing about who was on the land or when, sheep herding life, references to America or a longing for female companionship, these carvings preserve an interesting slice of history of the Old West.

Bark carvings (arborglyphs); right, bark carving reads “Patacon 10 July 1927”; below, carving reads “Tim O’Keeffe 1939”.



Photos by Carol Pedersen