

Western Redcedar, “Tree of Life”

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One of the most magnificent conifers in Pacific Northwest forests, the western redcedar (*Thuja plicata*) flourishes along the coastal fog belt from Alaska to northern California, and inland from the Pacific Ocean to Montana.

Although most commonly found in the lush forests of moist habitats – forested swamps, wet ravines, poorly-drained lowlands, riparian areas, and stream banks – it also can grow on dry or rocky slopes. Rarely found in pure stands, this evergreen thrives in mixed conifer forests, and is frequently associated with Douglas-fir and western hemlock.

Not a true cedar, just a northwest rainforest “giant”

The western redcedar is actually an arborvitae - a “false” cedar. The spelling of the name “redcedar” as one word indicates that this is not a true cedar. One of Oregon’s four native conifer species referred to as cedars, none of them are actually cedars at all – true cedars grow only in the Mediterranean regions of the world. The Latin names come from ancient Greek words – “thuja,” for a now unknown, long-lost aromatic evergreen wood, and “plicata,” meaning “folded into plaits,” which could refer to the tree’s characteristic foliage or its’ furrowed, stringy bark.

This is a tall tree – easily growing to 150-200 feet, with a conical to irregular crown and many leaders. The dense branches are arching and pendulous, with flattened frond-like, fanning branchlets providing protection from the elements. In fact, one Native American word for this tree means “dry underneath.”

Western Redcedar’s sharply pointed scale-like needles are glossy green above and white-striped below.



photo by Cynthia Orlando, ODF

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Photo by Chris Evans, forestryimages.org

It's also a broad tree – the broadest in the northwest, with a buttressed base easily reaching two to eight feet in diameter, surpassing 15-20 feet at ground level in the oldest specimens. And it is one of the most long-lived of the conifers – if undisturbed, easily surpassing one thousand years.

This evergreen's sharply-pointed, scale-like needles are glossy green above and white-striped below, and 1/16-1/8 inch in length, opposing in alternating pairs in four rows. Foliage is aromatic, with a spicy fragrance.

Western redcedar is known for reproducing from root or branch development on fallen trees – the classic “nurse logs” often seen in northwest forests that can also nourish other forest species. Its magnificent bark ranges in color from grey to reddish brown, and is deeply furrowed and separated into flat, connected ridges. One-half to one inch thick, this bark is fibrous and peels or sheds easily.

Wildlife use this tree in many ways. The foliage can be an important winter food source for elk, while browsed year-round by deer and rodents. Black bears den in the hollowed-out trunks of aged trees, and the old growth forests containing western redcedar provide valuable habitat for spotted owls and Vaux swifts.

Versatile, aromatic, beautiful and durable

An internet search for western redcedar products reveals the versatility of this species' soft wood. A leader in shingles and siding, other classic uses include poles, fences, decks, windows and doors, frames and moldings, paneling, greenhouses, outdoor furniture, saunas, boats, gazebos, and much more.

It provides some of the lightest wood of the conifers, soft in texture and easily worked without specialized equipment. Despite that, it is one of the most durable woods in the world. Finished correctly, western redcedar products will last for decades – even centuries – weathering and aging year after year, holding their own in the elements.

In the forest, a fallen cedar can remain on the forest floor for well over a century. This durability is the result of a natural preservative that is toxic to decay-causing fungi. This ability does not decrease with age; in fact, it increases.

The wood is also exceptionally aromatic. Properly sealed, it may retain its pungent odor for longer than a century, repelling moths and other

pests – one reason for its popularity in paneling for closets and lining storage chests. It's also extraordinarily attractive – richly textured, with fine, even, straight grain in warm tones of amber, cinnamon, and sienna, with a lush, satin luster. The beauty of this wood compliments virtually all architectural designs – from the very old to the most modern.

“Life giver” for many coastal Indians

The western redcedar is often referred to as “the cornerstone of northwest coastal Indian culture.” Among the names given this tree were “tree of life” and “life giver,” and some tribes called themselves “People of the Cedar.” Groves of ancient cedars were symbols of power, and gathering places for ceremonies, retreat, and contemplation.

All parts of the tree were used, providing shelter, clothes, weapons, tools, medicines, art, and transportation. Lodges, lash-house timbers, planks, posts, and roof boards – gave shelter to many coastal tribes. Clothes, including skirts, capes, and dresses; weapons, such as arrow and spear shafts; tools and utensils like baskets, ropes, fishing nets, bowls and boxes; and medicinal remedies including poultices and teas were all made from parts of this sacred tree.

Much of this early use involved stripping the outer bark, leaving the tree itself still healthy and standing. Trees that have been scarred by this type of use are known as culturally-modified trees. In British Columbia, where many of these trees are found, they are considered archeological sites protected under the province's Heritage Conservation Act.

Whole trees were felled for making the distinctive totem poles that were an integral part of some tribal culture, and for the extraordinary, well-known dugout cedar canoes necessary for transportation along the edges of the ocean's coastal forests. The western redcedar is so well known for this that another of its many names is “canoe cedar.”

From the past through today; part of our culture and our heritage; symbols from long ago, and products we use and admire every day. In the Pacific Northwest, this beautiful, sturdy, and versatile tree gracefully showers us with all of this and more. 🌲

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