Western Larch
(Larix occidentalis)

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Autumn has come again. And while the western United States may not have the same reputation for fall foliage as the eastern states, fall color still seems to be everywhere we look.

The vast coniferous forests of the Pacific Northwest are one reason most people don't think of western states in association with fall color, but those of us who live here know full well the fall beauty that deciduous trees like ash and vine maple share with us every year like clockwork.

Most astonishing? In some special forests of Oregon's northcentral and eastern mountains, one conifer is putting on a fall color display of its very own. It is the western larch, one of the only cone-bearing trees to lose its leaves every year and one of Oregon's best-kept secrets.

That's because, before the western larch loses those leaves – or needles – they turn a brilliant yellow-gold.

Larches of all kinds are often referred to as tamaracks, particularly by those from the eastern United States, where the true tamarack, another larch species, grows. Although there are 10-14 species of larch throughout the world, the western larch is one of only two larches that grow in the Pacific Northwest, and the only larch native to Oregon.

In Oregon, Western larch often grows inter-mixed with other conifers. Against the traditional dark evergreen colors of their neighbors, their golden fall color can be spotted for miles around. If other deciduous trees are growing in the same area, the western larch drop its needles and shows its shimmering color later than those other species; hence, they are still the golden stars of Oregon's forests, standing tall and shining alone.

And the show doesn't stop there. After remaining bare throughout the harsh, cold winter, the lush new growth on the western larch in early spring is a brilliant pale green – still setting them apart from afar among the deeper colors of the surrounding forests.

As summer follows spring, the needles darken to a more traditional evergreen color, but if you know what to look for, western larches can still be easily spotted among other trees in our forests. They are fast-growing and amazingly straight and tall – up to 180 feet – with a narrow, pyramidal and conical crown.

Photos courtesy ashcreekimages.com

Western Larch branch and pinecones.

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The relatively short, horizontal limbs often seem exactly parallel to the ground. They are a member of the pine family, so like other pines, their lower limbs will drop as the trees continue to grow. A mature western larch will often only have limbs on the upper third or half of the tree; a tall tree may have 60-100 feet of bare trunk before branches begin.

The feathery-looking, radiating needles are narrow and flat, from one to two inches long, and grow from wood nubs, yellow-green when they first appear, darkening in color throughout the year. Western larch cones are small, oblong and woody; young cones will be a deep reddish-purple, maturing to brown, and hanging on to the tree long after they have been pollinated, dispersed their seeds, and turned to grey-black shells.

Long on beauty… and long on life

These are amazingly long-lived trees – 500 years is not unusual, and western larch trees up to 800 years have been found. The reddish-brown bark of mature trees becomes deeply furrowed and, again like other members of the pine family, may break away from the trunk in jigsaw puzzle-shaped pieces. The trunk of a mature tree may be up to four feet in diameter.

These trees prefer to grow at elevations of 2000 to 7000 feet on northern- and eastern-facing mountainsides, and in valleys, in the coolest, wettest areas of what are often the driest, hot eastside forests. While they prefer the coolest locations, they need the sun, and will not survive in the shade. Because of their strong and thick bark, mature trees can withstand fires of moderate intensity. In fact, western larches are often among the first trees to return following fire, thriving in the forest openings that can be created after wildfire sweeps through an area.

Habitat uses and history

Western larches are also valuable for wildlife. Mature larch trees provide habitat for nesting bald eagles and goshawks; western larch snags are important homes for cavity-nesters, like woodpeckers. Its seeds are prized as food by many birds, including pine siskins, redpolls, and crossbills.

The western larch was one of the 179 previously undocumented plants and trees catalogued by the Lewis and Clark expedition, and Oregon's Native Americans found many uses for these trees. It was easy to gather firewood from younger trees, and large, pitchy burls from older trees were used to make pots. The gummy resin produced under the tree's bark was used to heal cuts and bruises, chewed to ease sore throats, and brewed into tea, to relieve coughs and colds.

Because of its strength, decay-resistance, and the beauty of its fine-grained wood, western larch is an important tree for wood products. Its wood is sought after for poles, flooring, cabinets, and interior and exterior trim materials, and it also makes excellent firewood because of the high heat it produces as it burns.

From its brilliant new green of spring and deep emerald of summer, to its vivid golden color in autumn, the unique and magnificent western larch is yet another example of the beauty of Oregon's native forests.

Forest Health Note: What's damaging Western Larch in Oregon?

A recent publication of the Oregon Department of Forestry highlights the major insects and diseases that can damage western larch trees in Oregon. You can download a copy of this Forest Health Note at **www.oregon.gov/ODF/PRIVATE_FORESTS/docs/fh/larchcasebearer.pdf**

Warning . . . that tree is not dead!

Because the western larch changes color and loses its leaves, it breaks all of the rules that we learned in school about evergreen and deciduous trees. As a result (and because this tree makes for such excellent firewood), many times when people see these trees turn color and lose their needles, they falsely assume the tree is dying and want to cut these great beauties down in the late fall or winter.

This short story illustrates the problem: many years ago when Oregon ran a contest for a design to be featured on its new license plates, the artist who won created a plate with a western larch in deep golden fall color as the center of its design. Due to many complaints about having a "dead" tree on Oregon license plates, a short time later the color of the tree was changed to green – another indication that the unique qualities of the western larch are not widely known.

So, just remember: for much of the year, a western larch may *look* different from its other cone-bearing cousins, but it's actually alive and well, and will again display its needles come spring and summer.