

About The Tamarack Tree:



Tamarack twig, adapted from Whitman 1988

The Latin name for Tamarack is *Larix laricina*. Other common names are Eastern Larch, American Larch, Red Larch, Black Larch, takmahak and Hackmatack, which is an Abenaki word for ‘wood used for snowshoes’ (Erichsen-Brown 1979).

Though the tamarack tree resembles other evergreens, it is actually a deciduous conifer, meaning that it sheds its needles every fall. It commonly grows in swamps and sphagnum bogs but also grows in upland soils. The flaky dark reddish-gray bark of the tamarack tree resembles Black Spruce. The pale green needles are soft and short (about an inch long) and grow in brush-like tufts on small knobby spurs along each twig. The cones of the tamarack are also fairly small - round, and less than an inch long

(Peterson 1977). Very often you will see the tall tamarack trees growing in pure stands. Just before the needles drop in autumn, the needles turn a beautiful golden color, affording the stands of tamarack a striking contrast to the fall foliage.

Tamarack trees are well adapted to the cold. The tree's natural range is from Labrador to West Virginia, northern Illinois and New Jersey, across southern Canada to Northern British Columbia Alaska. It grows near sea level in northern regions, and at higher elevations in the southern extreme of its range.

Tamarack Trees as Food:

The tender spring shoots are nutritious, and can be eaten when they are boiled. The inner bark (cambium layer) of the tamarack tree can also be scraped, dried and ground into a meal to be mixed with other flours... which some references indicate is an ‘acquired’ taste (Peterson 1977), while other references imply the gummy sap that seeps from the tree has a very good flavor when chewed (Hutchens 1973), as sweet as maple sugar.

Tamarack Trees as Medicine:

A tea made from tamarack bark is used as a laxative, tonic, a diuretic for jaundice, rheumatism, and skin ailments. It is gargled for sore throats. Poultices from the inner bark are used on sores, swellings and burns, as well as for headaches. For headaches, Ojibwe crush the leaves and bark and either applied as a poultice, or placed on hot stones and the fumes inhaled (Erichsen-Brown 1979). A tea from the needles is used as an astringent, and for piles diarrhea, dysentery, and dropsy. The gum from the tamarack sap is chewed for indigestion. The sawdust from tamarack may cause dermatitis (Foster & Duke 1977).

Alma Hutchins (1973) describes some of the uses for a tea made from 1 teaspoon of the inner bark of tamarack boiled and steeped for 30 minutes in a cup full of water:

*Because of its astringent and gently stimulating qualities the inner bark is especially useful for melancholy, often caused by the enlarged, sluggish, hardened, condition of the liver and spleen with inactivates various other functions of the metabolism. For domestic use in emergencies, or long-standing bleeding of any kind, in lungs, stomach, bowels, or too profuse menstruation. Also for diarrhoea, rheumatism, bronchitis, asthma and poisonous insect bites. J. Kloss in ‘Back to Eden’, recommends the weak tea as an eye wash and the warm tea dropped in the ear to relieve earache. A decoction of the bark, combined with Spearmint (*Mentha veridis*), Juniper (*Juniperus communis*), Horse radish (*Cochlearia armoracia*), and taken in wineglassful doses has proven valuable in dropsy. (Hutchins 1973)*

The Chippewa (or Ojibway/Ojibwe) word for tamarack is 'muckigwatig' meaning 'swamp tree'. The bark of the tree is used for burns. For burns, the inner bark of tamarack is finely chopped and applied to the burn in the morning and partially washed off at night, then reapplied the next morning. Tamarack used for internal medicine is said to be a laxitive, tonic, diuretic and alterative. The medical constituents of tamarack are a volatile oil which contains pinene, larixine, and the ester bornylacetate (Densmore 1974).

The Potawatomi and Menomini make a heat-generating poultice from fresh inner tamarack bark for inflammation and wounds, or steeped for a medicinal tea. They also use it as a medicine for their horses, either as a tea to help Menomini horses with distemper, or shredded inner bark mixed with oats to keep the hides of the Potawatomi horses loose (Erichsen-Brown 1979).

Tamarack Trees as Technology:

The wood is very sturdy and today is used for house frames, railroad ties and fence posts. (Whitman 1988)

The tamarack or hackmatack has been an excellent timber much used for ships. It is practically indestructible under water and stands very well even where exposed. It is used to be the colonial substitute for the 'compass timber' of English oak used in the ships of the Royal Navy, it's roots furnishing the natural knees and other curved pieces so precious to the early shipbuilders. Unfortunately the tamarack as a commercial timber is no more, for some years ago an insect pest swept the country and destroyed all the trees of any size. Their gaunt skeletons, bare, grey and dry as tinder, may still be seen standing in northern bogs and muskegs, a tribute to the species durability. Fortunately new growth is rapidly coming on. (Lower, A. 1938)

The Ojibwe use tamarack roots to make twined woven bags. These roots are stripped of their bark and boiled to make them pliable. The bags are used to store medicinal herbs and roots as well as wild rice. Large tamarack roots stripped of their bark are also used to sew the edges of canoes (Densmore 1979). The Iroquois have used tamarack bark for tanning (Erichsen-Brown 1979).

The Cree have made traditional use of the tamarack, called 'wachinakin' or 'wageenakin', for millenia. In addition to it's medicinal uses, the Cree (or Eeyou) use parts of the tamarack tree for making toboggans, snow shoes, canoes and even firewood. But, perhaps the most well-known use is the elegant and lifelike goose hunting decoy made by the Cree from tamarack twigs.

The beauty and workmanship in these tamarack twig goose decoys is an outcome of the long interrelationship and mutual respect between the Cree people and the migratory flocks of geese. Canadian geese, snow geese, and other waterfowl have been an extremely important spring food source to the Cree. The Cree hunters, likewise, have been beneficial to these migratory birds by traditionally keeping their populations within the sustainable limits of the surrounding environment. With this recognition of a necessary balance between human and animal food resources, the Cree living along James Bay have developed complex hunting rules and restrictions. "Goose Bosses" monitor and regulate the hunting in adjacent bays where migratory birds frequent, these people ensure that the geese will not be frightened away prematurely, and will return to these places in future migrations (Scott 1989). The men of the Cree set up Goose Camps in the early spring, and stay there, returning to their families in the village with geese, and then returning to the temporary camps. The first time a boy kills a goose is traditionally an meaningful occasion, and the goose's head is often honored with beadwork and kept as a remembrance.

Making of the tamarack twig goose decoys, as an aid in hunting, has been passed down among the Cree people, generation to generation. It is a necessary technology which has, among some Cree craftspeople, evolved into a remarkable contemporary art. You can see how two such Cree artists from James Bay, Quebec [John Blueboy](#) and [Harry Whiskeychan](#) bring to life these tamarack decoys ... "they are watching, listening, aware", in the words of the friend that inspired me to get started on this section of Tamarack Trees & Traditions. (~ thank you Barry)