

*Abies balsamea*

[Synonyms : *Abies balsamea* var. *balsamea*, *Abies balsamea* var. *brachylepis*, *Abies balsamea* forma *hudsonia*, *Abies balsamea* var. *longifolia*, *Abies balsamea* var. *macrocarpa*, *Abies balsamea* var. *nana*, *Abies balsamifera*, *Abies fraseri* var. *hudsonia*, *Abies fraseri* var. *nana*, *Abies hudsonia*, *Abies minor*, *Peuce balsamea*, *Picea aromatica*, *Picea balsamea*, *Picea balsamea* var. *longifolia*, *Picea balsamea* var. *nana*, *Picea fraseri* var. *hudsonia*, *Pinus abies* var. *balsamea*, *Pinus balsamea*, *Pinus balsamea* var. *longifolia*, *Pinus taxifolia*]

**BALSAM FIR** is an evergreen tree. Found in northern North America it has needle-like leaves and small egg-shaped violet-purple cones

It is also known as *Abio balzama* (Esperanto), American silver fir, Balm of Gilead, Balm of Gilead fir, Balsam, *Balsamgran* (Swedish), *Balsamtanne* (German), Blister fir, Blister pine, Bracted balsam fir, Canada turpentine, Canadian balsam, Canadian fir, Eastern fir, Fir pine, Fir-tree, Gilead fir, *Hemlockstanne* (German), *Jedl'a balzamová* (Slovak), *Jedle balzámová* (Czech), *Palsamijalokuusi* (Finnish), *Sapin blanc* (French-Canadian), *Sapin baumier* (French-Canadian), Silver fir, Silver pine, Single pine, Single spruce, and *Tanne* (German).

Fragrant yellowish resin exudes from the trunk to form lumps or blisters (often referred to locally as 'spruce gum') – and it is also obtained from incisions made in the bark. Upon drying it becomes a transparent solid known as Canada balsam, Balm of fir, Balm of Gilead or Canada turpentine.

*Balsamea* is derived from Latin *balsamum* (sweet-smelling balsam gum) and *-fer* (bearing, carrying) components meaning 'balsam-bearing, balsamic or like balsam'.

The fragrant needle-like leaves (which have softer and blunter tips than those of, say, spruces) are used to stuff cushions and pillows. This is not a modern idea as several North American Indian tribes including the Malecite, Abnaki and Potawatomi Indians used the needles this way. The latter two tribes particularly believed that the needle-filled pillows were generally beneficial to health and that they deterred colds. Returning to the present day, the leaves are also a commercial ingredient in some scented soaps.

In North America the tree itself has been used as one of the principal Christmas trees primarily because its needles last longer than those of spruces (or other competitors) once the tree has been cut.

The scented boughs were spread over tent floors by the Algonkin tribes, while some of the Cree Indians used them to build shelters. The Micmac tribe piled the boughs to make their beds.

Chippewa Indians took ceremonial steam baths in which the balsam fir needles played an important role.

The lightweight and scentless wood from balsam fir, although primarily a source of pulp (from which much is used for paper), has also been made into crates and has provided the staves for fish and sugar barrels. Earlier, of course, it was used as fuel and kindling by the Micmac tribe – and some of the Cree tribe living in the woodlands of what is now Saskatchewan made their canoe paddles out of it.

Resin (moulded into short sticks) was sold locally as a chewing gum. In the past in Quebec

(Canada) it has also been applied as glue, and the Chippewa mixed it with fat for a pitch for their canoes – and the Malecite tribe used it to waterproof canoe seams as well.

Now Canada balsam is used commercially in the optic industry for cementing lenses. It is also employed by the pharmaceutical industry in medical preparations, as well as in research where it is used in the preparation of microscopic specimens. Furthermore the resin is used today in the manufacture of soaps by the toiletry industry, and also in the production of lacquer.

In New Brunswick in Canada the tree roots offered sewing thread for the North American Malecites.

Chippewa Indians mixed bear grease with the gum for dressing their hair.

The Micmac North American Indians who lived in today's maritime provinces made a beverage from the bark.

Various North American Indian tribes used the balsam fir as a source of medicine in many different ways for a wide range of disorders. Certainly it would seem that the tree's primary value for the indigenous population lay in its medicinal properties – and the following summary only touches the surface. Different forms of the gum were used by the Abnaki, Micmac, Iroquois, Algonkin, Cree, Menominee and Chippewa tribes. Between them they employed the gum for treating skin disorders, burns and wounds. It was also used in treating chest disorders and headaches, and the Anticosti ate it as a cure for some kidney ailments. Iroquois Indians combined the gum with dried beaver kidneys in a poultice which was applied to some cancers. The roots offered an ingredient for the Algonkin tribe's treatment of some heart disease, and the steam from a root decoction was considered by the Chippewa to be beneficial in easing rheumatic pains. The needles were made into a laxative tea by the Algonkin. The outer and inner barks were used variously by the Algonkin tribe, the Cree, Micmac, Potawatomi, Malecite, Menominee, Chippewa and Montagnais Indians (alone or as an ingredient in various remedies) for such problems as kidney disorders, venereal diseases, colds and tuberculosis, and the Menominee also chose the inner bark as a medicinal flavouring.

Balsam fir has been adopted as a provincial emblem by the province of New Brunswick in south-eastern Canada.

Medicinally, balsam fir is still used today in orthodox Western medicine particularly in a now traditional remedy for sore throats, Friar's Balsam.