

*Acer macrophyllum*

**BIGLEAF MAPLE** is a deciduous tree. Native to western North America it has tiny, fragrant greenish-yellow flowers and leaves that turn yellow and orange in Autumn.

It is also known as Big-leaf, British Columbia maple, Broad-leaf maple, Broadleaved maple, Bugleaf maple, Californian maple, Large-leaved maple, *Oregon-Ahorn* (German), Oregon maple, Pacific maple, Quilted western maple, and White maple.

When its wood displays swirled creamy-white to reddish-brown grain (up to 4 ft. wide) it is often called Burl maple, Madrona burl, Maple burl, or Plain burl. This abnormal wood tissue generally occurs at the base of the tree and its rarity and beauty makes it sought after.

*Macrophyllum* is made up of Greek *macro-* (large, long) and *phyllo-* (leaf) components meaning 'large-leaved'.

The sap was eaten fresh or dried by the North American Klallam Indian tribe, and it was boiled to give a kind of maple syrup by the Thompson tribe. Only the latter seem to have eaten the raw, juicy, sweetish-tasting shoots, but the Costanoan and the Thompson Indians ate the seeds – the latter boiled the bitter-tasting, sprouting seeds as a vegetable. The leaves when added to food cooking in steaming pits provided a flavouring for deer, seal and porpoise for both the Saanich and the Cowichan Indians who lived on the south-eastern side of what is now Vancouver Island.

Several tribes used the leaves in the course of cooking and preserving. When the Squaxin were cleaning fish they laid their catch on the leaves, and the Karok made them into mats for interleaving layers of dried salmon when the fish were being stored in baskets for the Winter. The Thompson Indians used the leaves for layering food both in storage and in cooking pits, and they were also used by the Karok, the Snohomish and the Skagit to line the pits and/or cover them when cooking their food.

Flexible twigs provided a coarse coiling thread for the Maidu tribe who also used them for basketry, as did the Makah. Both the Thompson and the Concow Indians used the inner bark for basketwork and the former also employed it as scouring pads. The Cowlitz made rope from the bark. Apparently two tribes in California are known to have used the bark for making clothing. Its fibre could be found in the skirts worn by the women of the Tolowa tribe, and the bark is said to have been the source of the material used for crude dresses seen on Concow women. Not least strips of bark were used by the Wailaki tribe to make deer hunting equipment.

The hard lightweight wood was valued by some North American Indian tribes for a range of purposes. It was made into canoe paddles by the Klallam Indians, and the Skagit, Snohomish and Nitinaht tribes. For many tribes such as the Kwakiutl, Cowichan, Nitinaht, Karok, Skagit and Lummi it was also useful for cooking tools and utensils such as stirring paddles, spoons, dishes and bowls. Both the Swinomish and Chehalis used dead wood from this tree when smoking salmon.

Quite a few tribes including the Tlingit tribe, the Haida and the Tsimshian found the hard wood was suitable for carving. Ceremonial rattles were fashioned out of the wood by the Hesquiat Indians and the Kwakiutl. Also the latter (together with the Nitinaht) valued this lightweight wood for masks. This lightness also recommended it to the Pomo tribe for

making gambling dice. The Lummi and Swinomish Indians used bigleaf maple boards to make babies' cradles, and the branches were used on a larger scale by the Cahuilla and the Nisqually for building houses – although records suggest that the latter viewed these homes as temporary structures. And as the Salish and the Cahuilla Indian tribes both believed the wood burnt well it was valued as fuel.

In the Spring the Kwakiutl tribe made a hair tonic by mixing gum from the sticky buds with oil. A bark infusion was used by the Klallam Indian tribe to treat tuberculosis.

Like that in vine maple (*Acer circinatum*), although the sap contains less sugar than some of its well known close relatives, it is still considered to be worth tapping in the early Spring, particularly from the trunks of more northern trees that experience cold winters with the warmer summers of more southern areas. It is sometimes made into a soft drink and it is also concentrated to a syrup used to sweeten many foods. The dried, ground inner bark has been used locally as a thickening agent for soups and has been added to cereals in breadmaking. The large leaves have not escaped culinary attention either as they have been wrapped round baking food to which they are said to impart a pleasant flavour – and fresh raw flower spikes have also been eaten (in salads) and their nectar is said to give them a sweet taste.

As with other close relatives, the leaves were thought to have some preservative qualities and were wrapped around apples (*Malus*) and some root crops before storage.

Foliage within reach is enjoyed by cattle, horses and to a lesser extent sheep, and saplings are targeted by deer and elk. The buds, flowers and seeds offer food for many birds and small animals.

The wood has been used for carving and veneering, as well as for making furniture, building interiors, piano frames, and tool handles. It has also been burnt as a smokeless fuel.

As a tree, bigleaf maple is valued by town planners and pasture owners alike for its shade.

It is believed to have been introduced to Britain in 1826 by the well known Scottish botanist, David Douglas (1798-1834).