

*Alnus incana*

[Synonyms : *Alnus incana* subsp. *incana*, *Alnus incana* var. *pendula*, *Alnus rugosa*, *Betula alnus* var. *incana*]

**GREY ALDER** is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to temperate northern regions (excluding Britain) it has catkins.

It is also known as *Alder* (Swedish), European alder, *Gråal* (Swedish), *Grau-Erle* (German), Gray alder, *Harmaaleppä* (Finnish), Hoary alder, Mountain alder, *Olše šedá* (Czech), Speckled alder, *Weisserle* (German), White alder, and *Witte els* (Dutch).

The flowers are pollinated by the wind.

*Incana* is Latin (hoary or greyish-white) with reference to the leaves.

The North American Indian tribes had many uses for grey alder. Although records show that some of the Cree tribe applied a bark decoction to toboggan boards to make them more supple and added wood charcoal to pitch for sealing canoe seams, grey alder appears to have come into its own as a source of various dyes for many tribes including the Cree. The Shuswap Indians used grey alder for this latter purpose. Some of the Algonkin, and Chippewa tribes obtained a yellow dye from the inner bark; while some of the Cree Indians used the catkins for a similar colour which was applied to quills. An orange dye was achieved by Blackfoot, Nez Perce, Flathead and Kutenai tribes by using the bark, and some of the Cree chose the inner bark for this colour – again for use on quills. Inner bark was also combined with other ingredients by some of the Chippewa for a black dye. Then a red dye was made from either the outer or inner bark by the Navajo, Potawatomi and Chippewa tribes, and this colour dye (also from the bark) was used by the Flathead Indians on their hair. Finally the grey alder offered a source of a brown or reddish-brown dye (obtained from the outer or inner bark) for some of the Cree Indians and the Menominee, Flathead, Potawatomi, Nez Perce, Kutenai and Blackfoot tribes. Some of the Chippewa also used grey alder to achieve this colour by combining the inner bark with other ingredients.

As a medicine chest grey alder seems to have been able to rival quite a few plants. The Malecite and Micmac tribes chewed the bark for various oral disorders, the Shuswap and Menominee Indians used the bark for skin problems and the Mohican and Iroquois used different parts of grey alder to counter pain. Bark provided a remedy for tuberculosis among the Blackfoot, while some of the Chippewa used the root or bark to treat anaemia and sore eyes, as well as using it during childbirth and to cause vomiting. Then there were the Potawatomi who chose a bark infusion for piles, the Menominee who also used root bark to treat colds and some of the Cree Indians who employed bark as a laxative. Some gynaecological problems were treated with a bark infusion by both the Kutenai tribe and the Potawatomi.

In veterinary medicine grey alder root bark was used by both the Menominee Indians and the Potawatomi Indians to treat their horses for saddle gall.

Although the soft lightweight wood splits easily it has been made into small items ranging from waterpumps and moulds for manufacturing glass to cigar boxes and footwear – and the bark has been used for tanning.