

*Alnus rubra*

[Synonyms : *Alnus oregana*, *Alnus oregona*, *Alnus rubra* var. *pinnatisecta*]

**OREGON ALDER** is a deciduous tree. Native to the western United States (from Alaska to California) it has catkins.

It is also known as *Aune d'Oregon* (French), Pacific coast alder, Red alder, *Rödal* (Swedish), and Western alder.

Warning – contact with the wood can cause dermatitis.

The reddish-tinged, nearly white wood turns light brown upon exposure to air.

*Rubra* is derived from Latin *ruber* (red).

Some Inuit tribes (and the Snohomish, Quileute and Quinault North American Indians all in the Washington area in the north-western United States) particularly used the red dye obtained from the bark for making their fish nets invisible to the fish. A red dye was obtained from the bark by several other North American tribes too including the Oweekeno, Thompson, Nitinaht, Hesquiat, Bella Coola, Kwakiutl, and Wintoon; and a brown or reddish-brown dye was made from the bark by the Lummi, Snohomish, Quinault, Thompson, Nitinaht, some of the Salish, the Quileute and some of the Kwakiutl. The bark was also used by both the Yurok and Tolowa Indian tribes for dyeing. Other tribes such as some of the Kwakiutl used the bark as a source of both a black and an orange dye.

Peoples in Alaska used to hollow out the tree trunks to make canoes. Wooden canoe bailers made from this tree seem to have had some popularity among the Nitinaht, Hesquiat and Oweekeno tribes, and the Quileute Indians used young wood for making canoe paddles. It was also used by the Hesquiat, Salish, Nitinaht, Kwakiutl, Skagit, Makah and Klallam Indians for making cooking utensils. The Oweekeno chose this wood for tool handles, and the Salish and Skagit tribes made it into spoons. The Nitinaht Indians also fashioned model canoes out of it. Perhaps in more pragmatic vein however, some of the Salish tribe made arrow points from the wood.

Ceremonial trappings such as masks and musical rattles were made out of the pale brown wood by the Klallam, Kwakiutl, Oweekeno and Nitinaht tribes.

The Tolowa, Karok and Yurok tribes used the stems for basketry. The Karok tribe also lashed the stems together and used them, soaked, in their sweat houses.

Nitinaht Indians placed the stems (and leaves) around food cooking in pits or kettles. But the bark was preferred by the Quinault Indians who used it to line their storage containers for elderberries (*Sambucus*).

Both the Swinomish North American Indian tribe and some of the Keresan tribe ate the sap – and the Klallam tribe added it as a sweetener in some food.

The wood has been used for smoking fish or meat by quite a few North American Indian tribes including the Hesquiat, Bella Coola, Thompson, Hanaksiala, Swinomish, Kitasoo, Oweekeno, Makah, Skagit and Nitinaht.

Good charcoal could be obtained from the wood and it was also used as fuel by some of the North American Indian tribes, including the Bella Coola, Klallam and Haisla tribes. (Today it is now attracting attention in western North America as a commercial source of fuel, not least for electricity power stations.)

Oregon alder was used by a couple of tribes in less common ways. The Makah Indians once smoked the leaves as a tobacco, and the Nitinaht tribe watched for its absence from the banks of creeks in its natural range as they believed this was an indication that the water was unfit to drink.

The tree itself flourishes in areas of land reclamation such as cleared forest and landslides. With this in mind it has been participating in the rehabilitation of old coal mining areas in the State of Washington in the north-western United States.

Oregon alder like many of its close relatives provided a source of medicines for quite a few North American Indian tribes including the Cowlitz, Saanich and Nitinaht. A little more specifically its catkins were used by the Klallam tribe for treating sores, although the bark was preferred for this purpose by the Swinomish, Pomo, Thompson and Kwakiutl Indians, and also by the Carrier and Haisla tribes for treating wounds. The catkins were used by the Klallam Indians as well for treating lung disorders, while the bark and root were chosen by the Gitksan tribe for coughs, and the bark was used by the Kwakiutl and Hesquiat tribes in treatments for tuberculosis (the former also for asthma, and the Swinomish for colds). Catkins were again preferred by the Klallam in remedies for diarrhoea and some stomach upsets, but the Carrier and Swinomish tribes used the bark for the latter problems. Oregon alder's woody cones were eaten by the Quileute Indians to cure dysentery. The Bella Coola tribe and the Gitksan both used bark as a purgative, and the Gitksan took a prescription of stem bark for headaches.

Use of the catkins was not confined to the Klallam tribe as the Thompson Indians also turned to them for offering a means of easing toothache.

Today the light brown wood is prized commercially for smoking salmon and halibut. In Oregon and Washington it is also sought after as an imitation mahogany (*Swietenia mahagoni*) for making furniture and for interior finishing, and it is felled for paper pulp.

Medicinally, the bark has been prescribed by North American herbalists as a treatment for indigestion, stomach upsets and enhancing appetite.