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Betula occidentalis

[Synonyms : *Betula alba* var. *populifolia*, *Betula beeniana*, *Betula fontinalis*, *Betula fontinalis* var. *inopina*, *Betula microphylla* var. *fontinalis*, *Betula occidentalis* var. *fecunda*, *Betula occidentalis* var. *inopina*, *Betula occidentalis* x *papyrifera*, *Betula papyrifera* var. *occidentalis*]

WATER BIRCH is a deciduous shrub or tree. Native to north-western North America it has shiny bronze bark and long, slender catkins.

It is also known as American red birch, Black birch, Canyon birch, Cherry birch, Mountain birch, Mountain bog birch, Red birch, Red canyon birch, Spring birch, Swamp birch, Sweet birch, Western birch, Western paper birch, and Western red birch.

Occidentalis means ‘western (especially North American)’.

For the North American Paiute Indians water birch wood meant material for making their pack saddles, the Blackfoot tribe fashioned bowls out of it, and the Okanagan-Colville used it for fuel. Branches of water birch were used by some of the Navajo Indians in a game referred to in records as ‘hoop and pole’ – and were especially valuable to the Blackfoot tribe as with both ends sharpened they formed them into the dome shape associated with their sweat lodges.

The bark (with others) was used by the Jemez Indians in New Mexico to obtain a red dye which was painted on their moccasins. The inner bark alone yielded a brown dye for the Okanagan-Colville tribe, who also used the outer bark for making cradles, baskets and canoes.

According to some records the Blackfoot tribe used the tree’s flowers and leaves for medicinal purposes.

Occasionally the wood has been used locally for making fence posts and for burning as fuel.