

*Betula papyrifera*

[Synonyms : *Betula alba* var. *papyrifera*, *Betula callosa*, *Betula carpatica*, *Betula concinna*, *Betula coriacea*, *Betula czerepanovii*, *Betula excelsa*, *Betula glutinosa*, *Betula papyracea*, *Betula papyrifera* var. *commutata*, *Betula papyrifera* var. *elobata*, *Betula papyrifera* var. *macrostachya*, *Betula papyrifera* var. *pensilis*]

**PAPER BIRCH** is a deciduous tree. Native to North America, it has leaves that turn yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as Birch, Black birch, *Bouleau à papier* (French and French-Canadian), *Bouleau blanc* (French), *Bříza papírovitá* (Czech), Canoe birch, *Chahasa* (Teton Sioux North American Indian), Gray birch, Large white birch, Northwestern paper birch, Paper-bark birch, *Paperikoivu* (Finnish), *Papier-Birke* (German), *Pappersbjörk* (Swedish), Red birch, Silver birch, *Tapa* (Dakota North American Indian), Western birch, Western paper birch, and White birch.

*Papyrifera* is derived from Greek *papyro-* (paper) and Latin *-fer* (bearing, carrying) components meaning ‘paper-bearing’ with reference to the bark.

The American poet and essayist, Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) noted that North American Indian tribes in the Maine region made a tea from the leaves. Records certainly show that some of the Cree made a tea from the root bark. The Montagnais tribe used the paper birch for food, and some of the Cree smoked meat or fish by burning rotten paper birch wood. The latter, the Algonkin and the Tanana Indians all used the sap as a sauce. Authorities have also noted that many tribes (Micmac, Flathead, some of the Chippewa, the Algonkin, Tanana, Wet’suwet’en, Malecite, Dakota, Thompson, Gitksan and Koyukon) kept food in storage containers made from the waterproof bark (or used it to line storage pits) as the food deteriorated less quickly. (The Abnaki Indians are said to have covered stored wood with the bark in order to maintain its condition.)

They also used the thin, reddish-brown bark to make other containers, such as buckets, and the Potawatomi, Dakota, some of the Cree, the Tanana, Chippewa and Thompson tribes all fashioned cooking tools and utensils, drinking vessels, and spoons from the bark as well. The last four and the Shuswap, Bella Coola, Abnaki, Koyukon, Gitksan, Micmac, Algonkin, Carrier and Okanagan-Colville tribes all used the bark for making baskets and bags.

It was employed by the Micmac to make coffins – and in that context this was one of the species of birch that played a significant role in mourning ritual for some of the Chippewa tribe. When one of their number died bark was placed on the coffin before it was interred. Species of birch (and cedar) were sacred to the tribe – and collection of any birch had to be accompanied with a ritual offering to Grandmother Earth and Winabojó. They also believed that birch trees were never hit by lightning so that it was completely safe to shelter under them.

The bark was also used in building by the Algonkin, Tanana, Thompson and some of the Chippewa tribes, while some of the Cree Indians used it to make their bathtubs. All of them also used the bark (and the strong, lightweight wood) for making the covering (and ribs) of their light, durable canoes, as did the Carrier, Meskwaki, Potawatomi, Montana Indian, Okanagan-Colville, Abnaki, Bella Coola, Malecite, Micmac and Koyukon tribes.

The bark's versatility would seem to have no end as records note how it provided a covering material for tents, tepees and shelters for the Meskwaki, Micmac, Potawatomi, Algonkin and Chippewa Indians and some of the Cree Indians used the wood as well for tepee poles. The Tanana, Thompson and Okanagan-Colville tribes fashioned the bark into babies' cradles.

Bark fulfilled an unusual role for the Tanana Indians. It seems that on reaching puberty young girls had to wear a wide-brimmed hat, made from birch bark, which was supposed to prevent innocent eyes from resting on forbidden sights. For children in the Ponca, Omaha, Winnebago, Dakota and Pawnee tribes bark was synonymous with wadding for their popguns.

Bundles of rolled bark were used as torches by the Wet'suwet'en, Gitksan, some of the Chippewa and the Dakota North American Indian tribes. The bark (and sometimes the wood itself) also provided fuel for several tribes, including some of the Cree and Chippewa, as well as the Koyukon and Tanana Indians.

Records explain that for hunters in some of the Cree tribe the bark was also made into an instrument that helped them to imitate moose calls.

Indians in both the Thompson and some of the Chippewa tribes found the bark provided a substitute for paper, and the latter recorded some of their medicine rituals on it. They and the Algonkin also used it for decorative inspiration either, as the Chippewa Indians did in working patterns on the bark itself or as the Algonkins who reproduced the design from chewed edges of bark on their moccasins or baskets.

On top of all this the chalky white inner bark yielded a brown dye for the Okanagan-Colville Indians, and (as an ingredient with others) a red dye for the Chippewa Indians.

Members of the Carrier tribe used fine roots as sewing thread.

The reddish tinged, light brown wood (which is also tough and water-resistant) contributed to many aspects of the life of quite a few North American Indian tribes. It was made into canoe paddles by some of the Cree Indians, and it was used for tool handles by the Tanana tribe. Both of them (and the Anticosti and Koyukon Indians) used the hard and strong, but lightweight wood to fashion snowshoes – and the Carrier, Koyukon, some of the Cree and the Tanana all employed it for making toboggans or sledges. For the Koyukon tribe the wood also provided material for fishing traps. Records suggest that the wood was especially appreciated by the Tanana tribe as, apart from the foregoing, they also made their drums from it and fashioned it into the spears they used for hunting bear, as well as their bows.

These amazing trees also provided many tribes with a medicine chest. The Potawatomi and some of the Chippewa used it for flavouring medicines generally, some of the Cree Indians turned to paper birch for easing toothache, and both they and the Shuswap tribe employed it for easing pain. Various female problems were treated with it by the Iroquois and some of the Cree tribe, and the latter also used it as a remedy for problems experienced by nursing mothers. The Chippewa tribe employed it as a laxative, and the Menominee used it to treat dysentery. Coughs and colds were eased with it by the Thompson Indians, and some of the Chippewa prescribed it for stomach cramps and blood disorders. Externally it was applied by some of the Cree Indians to burns, and they and the Algonkin tribe also used it as a remedy for various sores and skin rashes. Perhaps one of the most fascinating applications was that devised by the Tanana tribe. After covering a broken limb with soft material, the whole was encased in bark that was then heated so that it contracted to fit the injured arm or leg as a supporting cast.

Respect for its medicinal value was also apparent among Koyukon Indians as it played a significant role in their healing rituals, and in the Thompson tribe it also featured in a contraceptive ritual.

Today commercially the tree is harvested for wood pulp and for burning as fuel. It is also made into small objects such as spools, pegs or shoe lasts.

Paper birch has been adopted as an emblem by the western prairie province of Saskatchewan in Canada and by the state of New Hampshire in the United States (the latter in 1947).