

Juniperus occidentalis

[Synonyms : *Juniperus occidentalis* var. *australis*, *Juniperus occidentalis* var. *occidentalis*, *Juniperus pyriiformis*, *Sabina occidentalis*]

WESTERN JUNIPER is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to north-western United States it has small edible berry-like, whitish-bloomed, dark blue cones.

It is also known as California juniper, Canada juniper, Cedar, Pencilwood, San Bernardino juniper, Sierra juniper, Western cedar, Western red cedar, Yellow cedar, Yellow juniper, and Yellow red cedar.

The flowers are pollinated by the wind.

Warning – prolonged contact with the fresh wood can cause dermatitis and allergic breathing problems.

Occidentalis means ‘western (especially North American)’.

The berry-like cones provided food for a few North American Indian tribes. The Miwok Indians ate them fresh, some of the Apache tribe preferred the cooked cones, and the Atsugewi and Paiute Indians ate them not only fresh but also dried and ground into a flour which would keep for later use with other ingredients.

The North American Paiute Indians used the wood for building, for making drum frames and for fuel – and the bark (mixed with dirt) also offered material for making their ceremonial prayer sticks and for the wand used in their War Dance. Both Klamath Indians and the Paiute made their bows from the wood, and the Paiute used the leaves as stuffing for the ball with which they played lacrosse or hockey.

Bark was used to make clothing in the Paiute tribe – and they also used the roots for basketry. For the Navajo Indians western juniper was an ingredient in a red dye prepared for buckskin.

It was used in veterinary medicine as the Paiute treated their horses with it.

As a human medicine the plant was familiar to several North American tribes. It was used to treat colds by the Paiute Indians, the Shoshoni, some of the Apache and the Washo. The latter and the Paiute also considered it a remedy for headaches. The Paiute prescribed it for treating stomach disorders, internal bleeding, pneumonia, blood problems, some period problems, fever generally, malaria and rheumatism. They also applied it externally to boils and sores. The Shoshoni and Paiute tribes turned to western juniper as a remedy for smallpox, fluid retention, kidney ailments, venereal disease and influenza. Some of the Apache tribe used the plant to treat convulsions and female problems generally, and they and the Shoshoni also took it for coughs. Apart from the foregoing the Shoshoni Indians used the plant for treating measles, heart problems, oral ailments, worms and toothache, and they applied it to burns and took it as a tonic as well.

Western juniper has been cultivated as an ornamental plant since 1840 – which happens to be the year it was believed to have been introduced to England.

The essential oil has found its way into many items as a fragrance or flavouring, including on the one hand male cosmetics, soap, aerosols and insecticides and on the other drinks, food and medicines. Amazingly at least one authority notes that chickens have been fed with the dried cones so that they laid gin-flavoured eggs.

The wood was used by settlers for charcoal, poles, fencing and fuel – and it has also been used for house interiors eg. panelling. On a smaller scale this wood has also been used for inlay work and for making a range of items from sports equipment, toys and suitcases to decorative pieces such as jewelry boxes and goods such as clocks and pencils. Its roots have been made into pipe bowls and the wood shavings have been scattered as bedding for pet animals. Apart from the trees themselves the boughs have also provided material for Christmas decorations eg. wreaths – apparently 100 tons of the branches were selling for 1-2 cents/pound in Oregon in 1983.

In the last decade of the 20th Century western juniper came under the spotlight from a broad cross-section of bodies involved in its exploitation. These bodies numbered nearly 900 and included representatives from non-profit organizations and private industry, as well as private landowners and government researchers – a fair indication of the plant's importance today to the community as a whole (which was the point of mentioning this). Their aim was to ascertain how best western juniper could be handled for the greatest benefit of the many and diverse end products and uses.