

Larix decidua

[Synonyms : *Abies larix*, *Larix carpatica*, *Larix europaea*, *Larix larix*, *Pinus larix*]

EUROPEAN LARCH is a deciduous tree. Native to central Europe it has brown or reddish-brown catkins and needle-like leaves that turn gold in Autumn.

It is also known as *Červený smrek* (Slovak), Common larch, *Europäische Lärche* (German), *Europeisk lärk* (Swedish), Larch, *Lärch* (German), *Lariko Eŭropa* (Esperanto), *Larix* (Dutch), *Lärk* (Swedish), *Lärkträd* (Swedish), *Llarwydden Ewrop* (Welsh), *Mélèze* (French), *Modřín evropský* (Czech), *Modřín opadavý* (Czech), *Smrekovec opadavý* (Slovak), and Venice turpentine; and in flower language is said to be a symbol of audacity, and boldness.

The leaves have a mossy scent as they unfold. The tiny red or greenish-white flowers change from bright red through dark red to form chestnut brown scales (40-50 overlapping) on small, cylindrical cones (known when mature as larch ‘roses’) and these remain on the tree when the leaves fall.

Clear resin is tapped from the tree between late Spring to mid-Autumn and is used to make ‘Venice turpentine’.

Warning – the resin must be used with care. Even moderate doses can damage the kidneys and can cause blisters externally.

Decidua means ‘deciduous’.

Although European larch was not introduced to Britain until the 17th Century William Turner (c.1510-1568) who was a clergyman, physician and naturalist introduced the name Larch for the tree in 1548.

European folklore claimed that the tree could protect against evil. Children wore collars made of European larch bark to shield them from the evil eye, and it was said that the smoke from burning bark could drive away evil spirits.

In Siberia the European larch is revered as it plays a significant role in the primitive Shamanistic religious practices of the Tungus. Poles of European larch wood are used in sacred rites, and the shaman’s drum is edged with the tree’s bark. The tree from which these poles were made and the bark taken is left standing in honour of its contribution.

The turpentine tapped from the tree used to be exported exclusively through Venice and came to be known commercially as ‘Venice turpentine’. This has long been used in human and veterinary medicine and as an ingredient in several types of varnish.

The bark has been used in the past for tanning – and the inner bark has been and can still be valued medicinally.

European larch’s connection with Venice is fascinating. The city ‘stands’ on European larch (and some other species). From the 4th Century, in order to avoid the invading hordes that swept down from the North onto the northern Italian plains, many of the people had taken shelter in the marshes that then covered the Venetian lagoon. Five or six centuries later the inhabitants who had grown rich partly because of their naturally fortified position (the shallow waters surrounding them were not easily penetrable and protected them from the infighting that subsequently bedevilled the surrounding Italian towns and cities) decided to build more substantial structures than their wooden homes – and a method had at last been devised for providing the sought after solid base. European larch poles (like long

telegraph poles) were sunk into the lagoon's mud side by side and touching. On the piles thus formed the buildings slowly rose into being. Today (provided that the sunken European larch and other woods have not been exposed to air) these bases are not only intact but petrified. During excavation work necessary to restore the foundations of a particular building in the late 20th Century, this solidification proved to be such that a bit from a drill was actually broken by these 'wooden piles'.

The tree was introduced to England in 1620. In 1738 James, the 2nd Duke of Atholl, planted some of them in Scotland not far from Dunkeld Cathedral – and one is believed to exist there still. The 4th Duke is said to have established yet more of these trees on such a scale that in the 19th Century it was said to have spurred their popularity in Britain as a whole. Today the tough and durable, reddish-brown wood is used for cladding walls of buildings, and for decking on cruisers, as well as for making furniture.

In the past a tincture of European larch has been used internally for treating bronchitis and applied externally in remedies for skin disorders, especially eczema. The trees were a familiar sight around the Swiss clinics to which so many who succumbed to tuberculosis resorted at the end of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th – not least because their scent was held to be part of the cure. Today it can be still be part of the treatment for bronchitis and can also be used for healing urinary inflammation. The oil is used as an antidote for phosphorous poisoning.