

*Larix occidentalis*

[Synonyms : *Pinus nuttallii*]

**WESTERN LARCH** is a deciduous coniferous tree. Native to western North America it has needle-like leaves that turn yellow in Autumn.

It is also known as British Columbia tamarack, Hackmatack, Larch, Montana larch, Mountain larch, Oregon larch, Red American larch, Roughbarked larch, Tamarack, *Westamerikanische Lärche* (German), and Western tamarack.

The flowers are pollinated by the wind which also distributes the seed.

*Occidentalis* means ‘western (especially North American)’.

Parts of the tree have provided food for various North American Indian tribes. Sanpoil Indians ate the sweet gum that when solidified upon contact with air has provided the Flathead tribe with chewing gum as well. The Thompson, Flathead and Kutenai Indians have all collected the sap to make a sweet syrup, and the Okanagan-Colville and Paiute tribes especially have hardened it to make a sweet or candy.

The tree’s changing colour provided a clock for Okanagan-Colville Indians as Autumn approached or it was time for bears to hibernate.

Apart from its role in food or medicine, gum (heated) was also ground into a red face paint used by girls in both the Thompson and Okanagan-Colville Indian tribes.

Nez Perce Indians used wood from the tree for their bows, and Kutenai Indians also chose it for the central pole raised for their Sundance.

Rotten wood was collected by the Kutenai tribe for smoking buckskin.

Western larch was a source of medicine for several of the North American Indian tribes.

Thompson Indians prescribed a leaf and stem decoction for general lung disorders and to enhance appetite, and they also applied it to wounds and burns. They and the Okanagan-Colville Indians chose it in treatments for cancer and put it on sores, and the latter also turned to it as a remedy for some blood disorders and rheumatism. It was used by Thompson Indians during childbirth and to treat ulcers, and they and the Kutenai applied it to cuts – and also used it in treatments for tuberculosis. Western larch was put on bruises by the Kutenai, and the Nez Perce Indians chose it for colds and sore throats. It was also a cough remedy for both the Nez Perce and Thompson Indian tribes.

Records suggest that the buds are particularly enjoyed by some grouse and these birds also eat the needle-like leaves. Other birds enjoy the seed as do some small rodents, and the cones are cached by squirrels when those of more acceptable species are in short supply.

This strong, heavy wood has been used for general construction, as well as for making railway sleepers, utility poles, pit props and fence posts. It has also be used for manufacturing plywood, for veneering and building interiors, and making furniture. It is used for pulp and burnt as firewood too.

The bark yields a gum which has been used in paints, inks and pharmaceuticals.

Western larch is cultivated as an ornamental plant.

Medicinally, herbalists have applied the gum to cuts and bruises.