

Populus balsamifera

[Synonyms : *Aigeiros balsamifera*, *Populus balsamifera* var. *simonii*, *Populus candicans*, *Populus tacamahaca*]

BALSAM POPLAR is a deciduous tree. It is native to northern North America.

It is also known as Arabian balsam of Gilead, Balm, Balm cottonwood, Balm of Gilead, Balm of Gilead poplar, Balsam, Balsam cottonwood, *Balsampappel* (German), *Balsempopulier* (Dutch), Bam, Black balsam poplar, Black cottonwood, Black poplar, California poplar, Canadian balsam poplar, Canadian poplar, Carolina poplar, Cottonwax, Eastern balsam poplar, Hackmatack, Hairy balm of Gilead, Heartleaf balsam poplar, Northern black cottonwood, Ontario poplar, *Ontariopoppel* (Swedish), Poplar, Poplar balsam, Poplar tacamahac, Poplar buds, Tacamahac, Tacamahac poplar, *Topol balzámový* (Czech), Toughbark poplar, and Western balsam poplar.

Light yellow essential oil is extracted from the leaf buds.

Balsamifera is derived from Latin *balsamum* (sweet-smelling balsam gum) and *-fer* (bearing, carrying) components meaning ‘balsam-bearing, balsamic or like balsam’.

Many North American Indian tribes found a multitude of uses for balsam poplar. Its soft wood was used to make bowls and other utensils by some of the Tanana Indians, while some of the Chippewa tribe felled the trees for making paper. In the Winter the Montana Indian tribe used the wood to make shelters – and they and some of the Tanana also gathered it for fuel. The latter chose balsam poplar for smoking fish as well.

The tree’s bark was used by Klamath Indians to make clothing, and some of the Tanana tribe made toys from it. Inuktitut Inuits used it to make their fishing floats.

Inner bark provided food for the Montana Indian tribe, and some of the Tanana ate the sap.

Young twigs were fed to Montana Indian horses when no more suitable fodder was available.

Some of the Cree Indians included the sticky buds as an ingredient in a lure prepared by their hunters. Resin from the buds offered an insect repellent for some of the Carrier tribe, but the Inuktitut Inuits preferred the burning bark.

The tree also offered various smoking materials. Its inner bark was an ingredient in a Montana Indian tobacco mixtures. The leaf galls were smoked alone or in a mixture made up by Inuktitut Inuits, and some of the Tanana Indians added wood ash to their tobacco mixtures.

Records suggest however that beyond anything else the tree’s primary beneficial qualities rested in its medicinal advantages. Shoshoni Indians used it to treat headaches and tuberculosis, and took it as a tonic too. It offered a treatment for heart disease, some female ailments and muscular problems in the Chippewa tribe. The Shoshoni and some of the Chippewa used it to treat blood disorders, the latter and some of the Tanana valued it for easing colds, and both the Shoshoni and Micmac Indians used it to treat venereal diseases. It was a remedy for stomach upsets in the Paiute tribe, some of the Chippewa used it for lung problems, and some of the Carrier and some of the Tanana tribes turned to it for easing coughs. Both Chippewa and Bella Coola tribes valued it for treating pain, and the Bella Coola and some of the Chippewa also used it to treat rheumatism. A sticky bud poultice was adopted by some of the Cree tribe for stemming nosebleeds. The Chippewa, some of the Algonkin and some of the Carrier Indians all applied it to

wounds. The Malecite, Micmac, Chippewa, some of the Algonkin, some of the Cree, the Potawatomi and some of the Tanana tribes all used it to treat various skin problems. The yellow gum that covers the leaf buds is used by bees to strengthen the edges of the cells in their hives.

The lightweight, brown wood is used commercially today to make plywood boxes and for the manufacture of paper pulp. Wood shavings are used for packaging.

The proprietary tincture known as Canada balsam uses the dried leaf buds of both *Populus balsamifera* and *Populus candicans*, and balsam poplar is used in other proprietary medicines too. However medicinally herbalists have also recommended the bark primarily for the treatment of fevers but also for gonorrhoea and urinary infections, gout, rheumatism, scurvy and diarrhoea. Today it can still be used for various urinary complaints, anorexia, stomach ailments and liver disorders.