

Sequoia sempervirens

[Synonyms : *Sequoia gigantea*, *Taxodium sempervirens*]

REDWOOD is an evergreen tree. Native to western North America (specifically northern California) it has needle-like leaves and small reddish-brown cones.

It is also known as California cedar, Californian redwood, Coastal redwood, Coast redwood, Giant-of-the-forest, Humboldt redwood, *Küsten-Mammutbaum* (German), *Küstensequoie* (German), *Mammutbaum* (German), and *Sekvoj vřdyzelená* (Czech).

Warning – prolonged contact with the fresh wood may cause allergic breathing problems. Redwood is a protected species.

Sempervirens is made up of Latin *semper* (always) and *vivo* (to live, be alive) components meaning ‘evergreen’.

Like the Mendocino Indian and the Tolowa North American Indian tribes, the Yurok Indians used to make their canoes from the tree’s soft wood – and later the Yuroks traded this lightweight red wood with the Karok Indians. It was also used by the Yurok, some of the Pomo, the Mendocino Indian and the Tolowa tribes for construction. Children in some of the Pomo tribe used the bark for their games, and Costanoan Indians cut sprouts for basketry.

The tree was a source of medicine for several North American tribes. The bark was an ingredient in Tlingit treatment for venereal disease, and Pomo Indians not only took it both as a stimulant and as a tonic but they also used a poultice of heated leaves to ease earache. It was used by the Houma tribe to treat jaundice and blood ailments.

First known records of the redwoods are believed to be contained in a report of 1769 by Father Juan Crespi (1721-1782), a Spanish Franciscan explorer, who christened the tree after the colour of its wood.

In Cornwall in south-western England there are fossilized remains of redwoods that confirm the belief that these trees grew in various parts of the world over 40,000 years ago before the last Ice Age. Their massive height makes them modern contenders for the title of ‘highest tree in the world’. The tallest recorded redwood may well be that measured in 1956 in Big Tree Park, California which was claimed to be 368 ft. 7 in.

It is hardly surprising that redwood was chosen as an emblem of the state of California in the United States, as also the giant sequoia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*).

In North America uncontrolled felling has meant that the redwoods have been over-exploited in the past and commercial logging is restricted today to a few reserves.

The timber was sought after for many purposes including general building and shingling, building interiors, and making furniture, fencing and such varied items as railway sleepers, vats, coffins, wine butts and wooden piping.