

*Taxus brevifolia*

[Synonyms : *Taxus baccata* var. *brevifolia*]

**WESTERN YEW** is an evergreen shrub or tree. Native to western North America it has needle-like leaves and small cream flowers.

It is also known as American yew, Californian yew, Canadian yew, Mountain mahogany, Oregon yew, Pacific yew, and Yew.

Warning – despite absence of scientific proof it is believed that the leaves and seeds of this species are poisonous both for animals and humans. They can cause blurred vision, dizziness, salivation, cramps, vomiting, dilated pupils, coma and death. Prolonged contact with the wood can cause dermatitis.

*Brevifolia* is derived from Latin *brevi-* (short, low, small, tiny) and *-folia* (leaved) components meaning ‘short-leaved’.

Both the Karok and Mendocino Indian tribes in North America once ate the flesh of the small bright red fruit-like aril (which partially surrounds a single seed).

The heavy and elastic wood seems to have been especially popular among many North American Indian tribes and the range of uses to which it was put is amazing. Its strength led to its use by the Nitinaht, Quileute, Hanaksiala, Hesquiat, Oweekeno, some of the Salish, the Haisla, Hoh and Klallam Indians for canoe paddles, the Haisla tribe made canoe ribs from it, and it was also fashioned into bailers by the Quinault Indians. Spear shafts and harpoons (especially for whaling) were made in this wood by many tribes including the Samish, Quileute, Hesquiat, some of the Salish, the Nitinaht, Quinault, Bella Coola, Swinomish, Hoh and Makah Indians – and these tribes (with the possible exception of the Quileute, Hesquiat and Bella Coola) as well as the Flathead, Haihais, Montana Indian, Karok, Chehalis, Yurok, Mendocino Indian, Shasta, Okanagan-Colville, Snohomish, Klallam, Costanoan, Pomo, Hanaksiala, Oweekeno, Klamath, Thompson and Paiute also used it for weapons such as bows and arrows (the former especially). The wood’s strength was also of importance for digging tools which were made in it by some of the Kwakiutl, the Thompson, Cowlitz, Klallam, Nitinaht, Swinomish, Quileute, Hanaksiala, Oweekeno, some of the Pomo, the Hesquiat and the Quinault Indian tribes. Some of the Kwakiutl tribe made the wood into fire tongs, and the Tolowa and Karok Indians used it for making their tobacco pipes. The Hanaksiala and Haihais Indian tribes, as well as some of the Salish used the hard wood for fish-hooks, particularly for catching halibut. Bella Coola and Karok Indians made tool handles from western yew wood, the Quinault, Pomo, Klallam and Makah Indians used it for cooking tools, and the Oweekeno Indians and some of the Kwakiutl tribe made food bowls from it. It was used to make combs by the Quinault, Oweekeno, Cowlitz, some of the Salish and some of the Kwakiutl tribes, and the Nitinaht and Hesquiat Indians also used the wood when they needed to make strong needles. Drum frames were made from this wood by the Cowlitz Indians, and several tribes including the Quileute, some of the Salish and the Hoh tribes used the wood for their game disks.

Even if the uses of western yew were limited to those mentioned so far it would hardly be surprising to learn that some Indian tribes such as the Pit River viewed the tree as a cash crop.

Western yew featured in the ritual of several North American Indian tribes which would have been a measure of some of the respect in which they held it. The wood played a role in ceremonial ritual performed by both the Quileute and Hoh Indians, and the branches were used in mourning rituals by the Thompson tribe and in manhood ceremonies by the Nitinaht.

The wood was by no means the only part of the plant to be of interest to Indian tribes. The branches were used by Thompson Indians to make snowshoe frames, bark provided the Karok tribe with covering material for their stone knives, and the leaves were used either as a tobacco substitute or as an ingredient of tobacco mixtures by the Samish, Swinomish and Klallam Indians. The Pomo Indian tribe used the roots for basketry.

Some of the local North American Indian tribes used western yew bark as a disinfectant but it was also a source of a valuable drug used not least by the Tsimshian, Kitasoo, Thompson and Haihais tribes. It was used by the Bella Coola and Quinault Indians for treating some lung ailments, the Hanaksiala Indians used it for urinary disorders, and the Kitasoo, Haihais and Karok Indians all turned to it as a remedy for some stomach upsets. Chehalis Indians used it to cause sweating, and they and the Swinomish took it as a tonic, and the Yurok and Karok tribes both employed it for blood problems. Tsimshian Indians used it as part of treatment for cancer, it was applied to sunburn by the Okanagan-Colville, and both the Quinault, and Cowlitz tribes used it to heal wounds. Klallam Indians took a leaf decoction for pain.

This wood has been used for turning, veneering, panelling and carving and has also been made into furniture, canoe paddles, archery bows and fencing.

Medicinally, modern research by Western pharmaceutical companies has discovered that extracts from the bark can be helpful in the treatment of some forms of cancer.