

*Thuja occidentalis*

[Synonyms : *Cedrus lycea*, *Thuja obtusa*, *Thuja occidentalis* var. *fastigiata*, *Thuja occidentalis* var. *nigra*, *Thuja occidentalis* var. *pyramidalis*, *Thuja theophrasti*, *Thuja occidentalis*]

**WHITE CEDAR** is an evergreen tree. Native to north-eastern North America it has fronds of tiny scale-leaves, and small light reddish-brown cones.

It is also known as *Abendländischer Lebensbaum* (German), *Albero della vita* (Italian), American arbor vitae, American cedar, *Amerikanischer Lebensbaum* (German), Arbor vitae, *Arbre de paradis* (French), *Arbre de vie* (French), Atlantic red cedar, Cedar, Eastern arbor vitae, Eastern cedar, Eastern white cedar, False white cedar, Hackmatack, *Hecken-Thuja* (German), *Kanadalainen elämänpuu* (Finnish), *Kanadantuija* (Finnish), *Lebensbaum* (German), *Levensboom* (Dutch), *Livsträd* (Swedish), Michigan white cedar, New Brunswick cedar, Northern white cedar, *Ö mur ağ* (Turkish), Swamp cedar, *Thuia du Canada* (French), Thuja, Tree of life, *Tuja* (Italian, Swedish), *Tuja západná* (Slovak), *Túje západní* (Czech), *Vanlig tuja* (Swedish), Vitae, Western arbor vitae, Western thuja, Western white cedar, Yellow cedar, and *Zerav západní* (Czech); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of immortality, 'I never change', 'live for me', old age, and unchanging friendship.

Oil can be extracted from the leaves.

Warning – white cedar should only be taken in small doses (larger are poisonous) for a maximum 2-week period under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. The volatile oil is poisonous and deaths have been recorded from overdoses. It can cause severe gastro-entiritis, spasms, convulsions and coma. It should not be taken internally during pregnancy. It is poisonous for livestock if eaten in large amounts.

*Occidentalis* means 'western (especially North American)'.

The bark fibre was used by the North American Malecite Indians and the Menominee and some of the Chippewa tribe for basketry and for weaving bags. When building Iroquois Indians used the bark as a joint filler, and rolled bark served as torch material when Potawatomi hunters went out at night. Malecite Indians also used the bark for tanning hides.

Canoe frames were made out of the durable and pliable wood by several Indian tribes including the Chippewa, Micmac, some of the Algonkin and the Malecite Indians. Both the Micmac and Malecite tribes used this lightweight, light brown wood for making arrows – and the Chippewa also used it for fishing spears (especially to catch sturgeon), as well as for toboggans.

Sprays of leaves were layered like moth balls by the Menominee between stored clothing – whereas the Iroquois used branches as a moth repellent. The Chippewa Indians also put the scaly leaves among clothing but for their perfume.

White cedar played a role in Chippewa ritual as twigs were burnt as purifying incense. The Potawatomi tribe also used white cedar for purification in the belief that it could expel evil spirits.

An unusual application is recorded for the Chippewa tribe who used the tree to make a deodorant.

Chippewa Indians also made a non-medicinal tea-like drink with the tiny pointed leaves.

The tree was the source of medicines for several North American Indian tribes, including the Penobscot, Chippewa, some of the Cree and the Potawatomi. Both the Potawatomi and Menominee tribes added it to medicines as a flavouring, the latter and the Montagnais and some of the Chippewa also used it to cause sweating, and it offered a stimulant for both the Menominee and Iroquois Indians. It acted as a painkiller for the Penobscot Indians. The Micmac, Malecite, and some of the Algonkin used it for toothache, and it provided a treatment for rheumatism for the latter and the Iroquois and Abnaki tribes. White cedar was used by the Micmac and Malecite Indians to treat tuberculosis, by some of the Cree for pneumonia, and by Micmac, Malecite and Chippewa tribes for coughs. Iroquois Indians used it during childbirth, and the Menominee and some of the Algonkin Indians valued it as a remedy for period disorders. Colds were eased with it by some of the Algonkin tribe and the Iroquois Indians, and the Micmac and Chippewa used it for headaches. Some of the Algonkin also valued it as a remedy for wind in babies. Blood problems were treated with it by some of the Chippewa Indians and the Iroquois tribe, the latter and some of the Algonkin used it for fever, and some of the Cree treated urinary ailments with it. Not least it was applied to skin problems by the Menominee, Penobscot, some of the Algonkin and the Iroquois Indians. The Malecite and Micmac tribes used it for treating wounds, and the Iroquois turned to it for healing burns.

In Canada the fresh branches were popular for besoms, mainly because of their fragrance. This wood has been used locally for building log cabins, shingling and fencing and has also been used for boatbuilding and pulpwood, and has been used for making canoe ribs and household containers (including buckets). Today the wood is used for fencing, railway sleepers, roofing, wooden bowls and small articles of furniture.

It was the 16<sup>th</sup> Century explorers who first introduced the white cedar to Europe. Britain was introduced to it in 1566. Parisian records show that it was first introduced to Paris in 1553 and in 1576 the French botanist, Charles de L  cluse (1525-1609) christened it *Arbor vitae* (tree of life) when he saw the tree growing in the French royal gardens at Fontainebleau. Authorities note that it is uncertain why this name was chosen as there appear to be no known associations between the white cedar and any cultural tree-of-life symbols.

Medicinally, a decoction of leaves and twigs was recommended by both American and European herbalists for the treatment of coughs, intermittent fever, rheumatism, scurvy and fluid retention. An ointment made from the leaves was used to remove warts and treat skin diseases and the Canadians were said to have eased severe pain with the powdered cones. Today its main use is in the treatment of cystitis, bronchial catarrh and period problems and the leaves and twigs can be used in homoeopathic treatments.