

Thuja plicata

[Synonyms : *Thuja gigantea*, *Thuja lobbii*, *Thuja menziesii*, *Thuja plicata*]

WESTERN RED CEDAR is an evergreen tree. Native to western North America (particularly British Columbia in Canada) it has fronds of tiny scale-leaves and small brown cones.

It is also known as British Columbia cedar, British Columbia red cedar, California cedar, Canoe cedar, Cedar, Columnar giant arborvitae, Giant arbor-vitae, Giant cedar, Giant thuja, Gigantic cedar, Gigantic red cedar, Idaho cedar, *Jättetuja* (Swedish), *Lebensbaum* (German), Lobb's arborvitae, Northwestern red cedar, Oregon cedar, Pacific arbor, Pacific arborvitae, Pacific red cedar, Red cedar, Red cedar of the West, Red cedar pine, *Riesen-Lebensbaum* (German), Shinglewood, *Tuja* (Slovak), *Túje obrovská* (Czech), Washington cedar, Washington red cedar, Western arbor-vitae, Western cedar, *Zerav obrovský* (Czech), and *Zerav řasnatý* (Czech).

Warning – prolonged contact with the fresh wood can cause dermatitis and allergic breathing problems.

Plicata is derived from Latin *plico* (to fold, fold together) meaning 'folded or pleated'.

Many of the North American Indian tribes including the Haisla, Hoh, Kutenai, Tsimshian, Okanagan-Colville, Makah, Quileute, Hanaksiala, Klallam, Kwakiutl, Oweekeno, Thompson, Montana Indian, Hesquiat, Nitinaht, Nez Perce and some of the Salish used the weather-resistant, lightweight trunks to make their canoes and often covered them with the bark – and some of the Salish Indians also made their paddles and bailers from the wood as well. Totems were made from the wood too (especially by the Makah, Haisla, Saanich, Tsimshian and Hanaksiala tribes) and quite a few tribes such as the Nitinaht, Gitksan, Snuqualmie, Kwakiutl, Tsimshian, Okanagan-Colville, Hoh, some of the Salish, the Haisla, Klallam, Hesquiat, Quileute, Nez Perce, Hanaksiala and Montana Indian used it for planks for building their lodges. The fibre from the inner bark was used for thatching and it also provided the Makah, Haisla, Quileute, Gitksan, Thompson, some of the Okanagan-Colville, the Hoh, Wet'suwet'en, some of the Salish, the Kwakiutl, Oweekeno, Klallam, Hanaksiala, Nitinaht and Hesquiat tribes with material for making ropes, and blankets. (Authorities have noted that some of the heavier rope was made from branches and that made by the Hesquiat Indians acquired such a reputation as ropemakers that they were able to trade it with other tribes.)

The fragrant dull reddish-brown wood was used for making babies' cradles by the Hanaksiala, some of the Salish, the Nez Perce and Haisla tribes (and the Klallam, Makah, Hoh, Quileute, and Chehalis tribes lined cradles with bark).

Many of the Indian tribes also used the wood or small branches to make musical instruments. The Oweekeno made trumpets and whistles from it, and the Quileute Indians strung shells from small branches to make dance rattles. Both the Hanaksiala and Haisla tribes made their ceremonial coffins, whistles and rattles with this wood too. Drum hoops or frames were made with it by the Paiute, Saanich and Okanagan-Colville tribes – and the Saanich, some of the Salish tribe and the Nitinaht Indians made their ceremonial masks out of it.

On a pragmatic note tribes such as the Tsimshian, some of the Salish Indians and the Oweekeno also used the wood for making various tools, and some of the Salish tribe used it for making combs.

Several tribes such as the Haisla, some of the Salish, the Thompson, Nitinaht and Hanaksiala Indians used the bark for their bedding, and many of them not least the Nitinaht, some of the Salish, the Gitksan, Hesquiat, Bella Coola, Thompson, Wet'suwet'en, Oweekeno, Haisla, Tsimshian, some of the Kwakiutl and the Okanagan-Colville tribes also chose it for a wide variety of mats and padding (including sanitary towels and babies' nappies). It also served as scouring pads for a few tribes including the Hesquiat, Thompson and Bella Coola.

Very many tribes including the Hoh, Kwakiutl, Oweekeno, Tsimshian, Chehalis, Haisla, Makah, Bella Coola, Thompson, Quinault, Hesquiat, Hanaksiala, Montana Indian, Klallam, Nitinaht and some of the Salish converted the bark into a wide range of clothing from work aprons and the lining and headbands of rain hats, to skirts and capes. Indians in the Salish tribe had an especially unusual application – they made the bark into protective covering for drummers' hands at Winter dances to give them some warmth.

The bark (and sometimes the roots or branches) was used for basketry by the Flathead, some of the Kwakiutl, Klallam, Montana Indian, Shuswap, Quinault, Thompson, Oweekeno, Hoh, Hanaksiala, Bella Coola, Wet'suwet'en, Quileute, Nez Perce, Gitksan, some of the Salish, the Okanagan-Colville, Squaxin, Hesquiat, Makah, Nitinaht and Haisla tribes. Local Indian tribes put the bark to many other uses as well. Shredded it provided some of the Kwakiutl with material to make paintbrushes, and the Okanagan-Colville and the Thompson Indians also used it to make sewing thread. Shuswap Indians made necklaces and belts from the bark. Bark was also used by the Nitinaht, Oweekeno and Bella Coola tribes for decorating their ceremonial masks.

Several tribes including the Hanaksiala, some of the Salish, the Tsimshian, Oweekeno, Haisla and Hesquiat used the bark for kindling – and some of the Salish and Kwakiutl tribes burnt the wood as fuel.

Both wood and bark were used by many tribes including the Hanaksiala, Makah, Tsimshian, Flathead, Oweekeno, some of the Salish, the Thompson, Haisla, Nitinaht and Kutenai for making containers for many different purposes. Records suggest that with the possible exception of the Thompson, Tsimshian and Flathead tribes those already mentioned and the Kwakiutl, Hoh, Cowlitz, Quileute and Hesquiat tribes also used the bark or wood for making various cooking tools.

North American Indian hunters and fishermen made much use of branches, wood and bark. The Quinault, Makah and Quileute tribes all used the branches for towing dead whales to the shore. Hesquiat fishermen used supple young branches to make fish traps – and straight ones were favoured by some of the Kwakiutl for fishing lines. The wood was used for making fishing gear by Tsimshian Indians and it provided material for herring rakes for the Squaxin and some of the Salish. Makah Indians made wooden floats for their fishing nets, and Hanaksiala and Haisla fishermen used the wood for spears and fish-hooks. Haisla and Hanaksiala hunters used the wood for noisemakers with which they could drive their prey, and hunters in many tribes including the Oweekeno, Tsimshian, Nitinaht, Okanagan-Colville and Makah used the wood for their bows and arrows. Some of the Kwakiutl Indians made their fishing nets with bark fibre, and the inner bark provided Hesquiat fishermen with material for spear shafts, while it offered anglers in the Hanaksiala, some of the Salish and the Haisla tribes with material for fishing lines.

The Thompson tribe obtained a green dye from the leaves and twigs.

When Haisla hunters went out in search of duck they camouflaged their canoes with branches – and they also used the branches to make torches for night fishing. For lighting after dark both Quileute and Hoh tribes made lamp wicks from the inner bark.

Western red cedar played a role in the ceremonial of many tribes. Apart from that already indicated it was an ingredient in Okanagan-Colville sweat-house bathing water, and the bark featured in some Haisla ritual. Nitinaht Indians used the branches during manhood ceremonies, and the Lummi included singed branches in mourning rituals. Young people reaching puberty in the Shuswap tribe came across the bark in the relevant practices, and it also featured in Hanaksiala fire dances. Oweekeno Indians used the inner bark and the wood during ceremonial rituals – and Tsimshian Indians made ceremonial horns out of the wood.

Thompson Indians were convinced that one would have vivid dreams if one slept under this tree.

Both the Montana Indian tribe and some of the Salish ate the layer between the wood and the inner bark (known to botanists as the cambium) fresh or dried. Some of the Kwakiutl tribe chewed the pitch like chewing gum.

After learning of the preceding cornucopia it comes as no surprise that at least two tribes, the Shuswap and the Thompson, viewed parts of the tree as a cash crop. For both it was the roots and these were bartered with other tribes at annual gatherings. Part of the explanation for the unusual demand for these roots is said to lie in the need for unsupported Indian women (especially widows) to be able to barter for food – and the coiled baskets they made with them are said to have fulfilled this purpose.

The tree provided a source of medicines for many of the North American tribes including the Quileute. For the Lummi Indians it offered a medicine for treating some lung problems, Bella Coola Indians turned to it for a remedy for bronchitis, and it was used in the treatment of tuberculosis by the Klallam. The Skagit, Bella Coola, Makah and Nez Perce Indians all valued it as a cure for coughs – in fact the Nez Perce had such respect for it that they prescribed it for both adults and children. Thompson Indians used it during childbirth, and the Chehalis relied upon it for treating some period disorders. It was used by the Bella Coola for easing heart problems and pain, and the Thompson tribe included it in treatment for leprosy. It was prescribed by Quinault Indians for fever, kidney ailments and venereal disease, and Hanaksiala and Nez Perce Indians used it as a remedy for diarrhoea and colds (and for the latter Nez Perce adults and children were treated similarly). The Cowlitz also used it to ease colds, the Kwakiutl tribe valued it for eye problems, it offered a gargle for oral ailments experienced by the Skokomish, and both the Okanagan-Colville and the Bella Coola tribes used it to treat rheumatism. Bella Coola Indians also applied it to wounds, and the Makah, Haisla, Okanagan-Colville, Kwakiutl and Quinault tribes all turned to it for healing skin disorders.

Its foliage is used in floristry and this tree has been adopted as an emblem by the western seaboard Canadian province of British Columbia.

The soft and brittle wood has been used for shingling, and poles and scaffolding, as well as boatbuilding and interior finishing. It has also been used for making greenhouse frames, boxes and crates. The importance of this wood at the beginning of the 21st Century is well illustrated by the fact that western red cedar is now cultivated in plantations in Europe for its timber. Today it is said to be especially in demand for boatbuilding, shingling and building bungalows, as well as for making greenhouses, totem poles, ladders and furniture.