

BALSAM POPLAR – *Populus balsamifera*

You'd know the balsam poplar for sure if you lived back in early Roman days when this tree ornamented public squares reserved for the masses. Hence the name, *Populus*, a tree of the people. In the Northwest Territories stands of balsam poplar line the sunny shores of our many lakes and rivers.

Its other name, *balsamifera*, refers to the tree's sweet-smelling resin or "balm" given off by its leaves. Its buds too are fragrant. Squeeze one after the leaves drop in autumn, during a winter snowstorm, or in springtime as it is about to unfold. You'll smell that lovely perfume. Mixed in breathable pouches with rose petals and fragrant herbs, balsam poplar buds are sold commercially to add an exotic scent to drawers full of clothing or keepsakes.

HUMAN USES

Traditional

- Ashes used as cleanser for hair and hide clothing
- Aromatic buds mixed with other ingredients to make animal traps
- Bud resin for sore throats, coughs, congestion, lung pain, rheumatism

Commercial

- Veneer, plywood, lumber, pulpwood
- Boxes, crates, shipping pallets
- Firewood
- Short, fine fibres good for tissues and other fine paper products
- Disinfectant properties of buds still used in health products to relieve congestion

WILDLIFE USES

- Young bark and twigs eaten by moose, beaver, snowshoe hare, porcupine
- Buds eaten by small mammals, grouse, ptarmigan

FIELD NOTES

- Fast-growing, short-lived tree
- Quickly shaded out by other trees
- Grows best in moist, rich, low-lying ground river valleys and flood plains
- Fire stimulates production of extensive root suckers allowing rapid colonization
- Bark of older trees up to 10 cm thick at the base which improves fire protection
- Largest balsam poplars in NWT found along the Liard River south of Nahanni Butte

FROM A DISTANCE

- Straight, cylindrical trunk
- Sparse, stout branches rise to form an open crown

UP CLOSE

Leaves

- Alternate, oval or broadly lance-shaped with finely toothed edges and pointy tip
- Shiny green above and pale below

Catkins

- Drooping catkins hang from branches in the spring
- Later burst into cottony parachutes bearing small, tan seeds

Bark

- Young bark is thin, smooth, grayish
- Grows thick, dark, and furrowed with age

