

MOUNTAIN ALDER – *Alnus crispa*

Alders always give back to the soil more than they take. They do this through an amazing relationship with special bacteria that live on its roots and can pump nitrogen out of the air and into the alder plant. Alders, in turn, provide the bacteria with starches which they make through photosynthesis. Through this mutually-beneficial relationship, each year mountain alders can add as much as over 60 kilograms of nitrogen per hectare to the soil. By literally pumping nitrogen out of thin air, this aggressive pioneer species improves the fertility of our northern soils, which benefits the entire forest.

HUMAN USES

Traditional

- Wood used to smoke fish and meat because of pleasant flavour it adds
- Bark contains anti-inflammatory salicin
- Hard but flexible wood good for hunting bows and snowshoes
- Bark used to make red-brown dye for caribou hides, snowshoes, and fish nets (fish have trouble seeing dark nets)
- Young catkins high in protein but not very tasty; good survival food

Commercial

- Little commercial value
- Wood from larger species of alder a favourite choice for electric guitar bodies

WILDLIFE USES

- Snow-covered branches provide thermal cover for snowshoe hare

FIELD NOTES

- Grows best in moist, nutrient-rich forests and beside streams and bogs
- Often occurs in dense clumps with willows

FROM A DISTANCE

- Tall to medium shrub with spreading, crooked stems and clumped crown

UP CLOSE

Leaves

- Oval, relatively large leaf, shiny green above, slightly hairy below
- Edges finely double-toothed, less taper-pointed than paper birch

Catkins

- Clusters of cone-like catkins develop in fall, hanging on long stalks
- Green, turning brown and woody at maturity
- Contain tiny reddish seeds with a narrow wing

Bark

- Smooth, reddish-brown or grey
- Marked with distinctive orange lenticels (horizontal pores for gas exchange)

