

Natives to Know: Tamarack (*Larix Laricina*)

By Joyce Tubarsky

One of our northernmost trees, the hardy Tamarack is a slender-trunked, conical tree that grows 50-75 feet tall. The needles are a bright blue-green and surprisingly soft. They grow in tight spirals around short knobby spurs along the twigs. Tamaracks are among the few conifers that lose their needles in autumn. Just before the needles drop, the needles turn a beautiful golden-yellow.

Tamarack cones are egg-shaped and among the smallest: less than an inch long. The bark is tight and flaky. Under this flaking bark, the wood appears reddish, giving the tree an interesting appearance even without needles.



Very cold tolerant, Tamaracks are able to survive temperatures down to -85°F . They are commonly found at the arctic tree line where it grows as a shrub. In more southerly locations, Tamaracks are normally found in wet soils in swamps, bogs and

along lake edges. They are among the first trees to invade filled-lake bogs and are fairly well adapted to reproduce after a fire. However, because of its thin bark and shallow root system, the tree itself does not stand up well to fire. Also, the seedlings do not establish well in shade. Consequently, other more shade tolerant species eventually succeed Tamaracks.

Tamaracks are native to much of Canada and south into the northeastern US from Minnesota to West Virginia. Because of its extensive range, the tree is known by many names: American Larch, Eastern Larch, Red Larch, and Hackmatack. The name "Tamarack" is Algonquian and means "wood used for snowshoes." Indeed, because Tamarack wood is very sturdy, yet flexible in thin strips, Native Americans used the wood and roots for many things: snowshoes, toboggans, sewing edges of canoes, and weaving twined bags. The Cree people used Tamarack to create hunting decoys by binding the twigs into delicate sculptures of



Canada geese. Handed down through the generations, these sculptures are now an important part of the Cree heritage.

Native Americans also boiled and ate the tender spring shoots of Tamarack, used the bark for tanning, ground the inner bark for flour, chewed the sweet sap, and used various parts of the tree to treat arrange of maladies. Because of its resistance to rot, Tamarack has been used for corduroy roads, curved pieces in wooden boats, railroad ties, fence posts and house frames. It is also a favorite tree for bonsai.

Under-appreciated as a landscape tree, the form and color of the Tamarack is as interesting as any imported species. Although it grows in moist, cool spots in the wild, the Tamarack is adaptable to aide range of conditions and is a good choice for wet soils where other trees will not grow. It prefers slightly acid soils and is intolerant of deep shade or air pollution.

More information and photos available at:

<http://plants.usda.gov/java/profile?symbol=LALA>

http://bioweb.uwlax.edu/bio203/2010/panich_just/Site/Habitat.html

<http://www.nativetech.org/willow/tamarack/tamarack.html>