

BALSAM POPLAR

(Black Poplar, Balm-of-Gilead)

Populus balsamifera

Buds:

The buds are resinous and aromatic, and thus the name balsam.

Flowers:

The flowers mature in April and May before the leaves appear.



Fruit:

The capsules bearing the seed mature during May and June when the leaves are almost fully grown. The seed germinates immediately after dispersal if conditions are

favourable. The seed is viable for only a few days and dies unless it falls on suitable soil.

Hardiness:

The balsam poplar will grow on all but the wettest soils. It prefers moist soil which is sandy and gravelly.

The poplar and willow borer are the most serious pests that the balsam poplar encounters. The forest caterpillar feeds on the foliage of a balsam poplar but only when its preferred trees are not available. Forest fire can easily destroy young trees with their thin bark while old trees are more resistant. Fire killed trees often produce suckers and start a process of taking over the burned areas.



Leaf

The leaf is raindrop or very slightly heart-shaped with very fine teeth. The colour is dark green and in the fall, the leaf turns black.

Because of this colour change, the tree is also known as black poplar. The lower surface of the leaves is pale with a brownish, metallic luster and resinous.



Trunk and Bark:

The trunk is smooth and grayish in colour.

Uses:

It is used for plywood and particleboard, as well as for pulpwood.

Tree Form:

This tree grows rapidly for its first 40 years. It can reach heights of 30 meters (100 feet) with a one to two meter diameter trunk. The tree is considered to be short lived, however, a number of balsam poplars have lived up to 135 years.



Wood:

The wood varies from nearly white to grayish or reddish brown. It is light, soft and low in strength.

Range:

The balsam poplar is found from Newfoundland, Labrador and Nova Scotia, west and northwest to Alaska, Yukon and British Columbia and south to Pennsylvania and North Dakota.

Habitat:

Typically found in low-lying, moist ground, this poplar prefers the alluvial soils of river flats, sandbars and the shorelines of lakes and rivers.

It forms pure stands but also is found with other species that grow in wet areas, such as speckled alder and willows. It also associates with balsam fir, white and black spruce, paper birch, black

ash, red maple and trembling aspen. It is not very tolerant to shade and will not usually grow in the understory of other trees.

Propagation: Balsam poplar propagates by seeds and from root suckers, from stump sprouts and from cuttings.

INTERESTING FACTS:

- It is one of the few large deciduous trees that can be used as ornamentals in northern towns and villages.
- It is used to make long thin wood shavings that are used in packing. These are called excelsior.
- In spring, when its leaves appear and the fruit develops, the balsam poplar gives off a characteristic odour.