



Let's learn more about eastern hemlock

EASTERN HEMLOCK. Latin name: *Tsuga canadensis*. Also known as Canada hemlock or hemlock spruce. If you happen to live in the French-speaking regions of Canada, it's known as pruche du Canada. No matter what you call it, let's learn more about it!

Prevalent across New England and over into the Great Lakes states like Minnesota and Michigan, the eastern hemlock can also be found all the way down into the Appalachian Mountains (think: Northern Alabama and Northern Georgia) and even throughout western Ohio and into Illinois. In Canada, you'll find the eastern hemlock in all provinces east of Ontario except Newfoundland and Labrador. The species flourishes in high-moisture areas, so check along rocky ridges, ravines and hillsides in areas of heavy moisture and high precipitation. Eastern hemlocks love shade and live an exceptionally long time.

What does it look like? It's a native-grown, evergreen coniferous tree with heavily foliated branches that sweep up. Most fully grown, mature eastern hemlocks clock in at around 60-70 feet in height and around 24-48 inches in width; one has been recorded at 5 feet 9 inches thick. One of the largest eastern hemlocks ever recorded was a whopping 175 feet high and 76 inches in width.

Its trunk is straight and almost never forks, while the bark is brown in color and deeply fissured. As the tree ages, these fissures tend to get deeper. The twigs are a brown-yellow and gathered densely on the branches, which makes them perfect for ornamental planting. The needle-like leaves measure under one inch in length, and the eastern hemlock wood is soft-looking (and feeling) with a beautiful coarse grain.

A little history. From 1880 to 1930, the eastern hemlock was harvested primarily for its bark, which was—and is—a source of tannin for the leather industry.

Eastern hemlock lumber production reached its peak between 1890 and 1910, with the primary product uses being light framing, sheathing, roofing, subflooring, boxes, crates and general millwork.

The eastern hemlock stands are considered essential for shelter and the bedding down of animals like the white-tailed deer during the cold winter months. Snuggled up next to the deer you might find ruffed grouse, turkeys and other forest denizens.

Sometimes planted as an ornamental tree, the eastern hemlock offers good foliage color and is adaptable to shearing. The past several years have seen sporadic infestations by the hemlock woolly adelgid, an invasive pest from Asia that feeds on the sap at the base of the needles. Control measures are in place today to stem the range of the bug and reduce damage and tree mortality rate.

How is it used? If you lived during the pioneer days, chances are strong you would have used an eastern hemlock broom for straightening your cabin. You probably would even have served tea from eastern hemlock twigs and needles to your pioneer friends! Another bonus? The inner bark can be eaten raw or boiled—especially in the winter and early spring—to make flour. Yum!

Today eastern hemlock is graded under the National Grading Rule. Although the species is moderately low in bending strength and shock resistance, eastern hemlock can be used in construction for light framing, sheathing, subflooring, and roofing. It's immensely popular in the manufacture of boxes, crates, pallets, and as paper pulp for newsprint and other low-quality papers. The unusually strong nail-holding capacity makes it perfect for holding spikes in railroad ties.

How much is used? Annually, more than 100 million board feet of lumber is manufactured by lumber mills located in the Northeastern U.S. The most common grades of eastern hemlock lumber and timbers are No. 2 or lower due to the prevalence of shake that develops within the tree over time, or through the drying process.

For more information on eastern hemlock or other New England/Great Lakes wood species, please visit www.nelma.org.

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