



Let's learn more about: Tamarack

WE'VE COVERED MANY tree species in this column over the last two years, to include the super-popular eastern white pine, SPFs, and even the newest belle of the ball, Norway spruce. This month let's take a deeper look at a small, hardy, versatile species with which you may not be familiar: tamarack.

This little species that could has more names than you would expect. Tamarack. In Latin, it's currently accepted scientific name is *larix laricina*. Then there are the larch family of names: regular larch, Eastern larch, red larch, black larch, and American larch. This unique species is steeped in Native American history, and they gave the tree the name of hackmatack.

The tamarack tree is unique in that it is a deciduous AND coniferous species, meaning it drops its needles in the winter. It grows into a medium- to large-size tree; when fall rolls around, the needles turn a lovely golden yellow hue and drop from the tree, to return in the spring. The cones are tiny and cute! During the year they begin their conical life a sweet pink color which eventually changes to a deep red, then a dark brown in the fall. Average lifespan of a tamarack tree is 200-300 years.

Slow growers, the tamarack tree is incredibly resilient. It grows well in an open area and needs dry soil

... but also wet soil. It thrives in wetlands—also known as the good kind of swamps, or forested wetlands—and does well in both low-rainfall and high-rainfall areas. Tamarack grows well in full light and can withstand cold temps down to negative 85 degrees. If you have a bog or peaty section of land near you and you live in Minnesota, chances are you have some tamarack trees out there.

Want more tamarack trees? It propagates best via cuttings. Wet ground allows for amazing biodiversity of the area surrounding the tamarack: plants, birds, and other animals like red squirrels, snowshoe hares, porcupines, songbirds, even the great gray owl—all can be found in the tamarack neighborhood.

A warning: along with the cute forest animals, tamarack growths also bring the poisons: ivy, sumac, and hemlock, plus nasty stinging nettles, are often found near tamarack.

Where does it grow?

The tamarack tree has a huge growth footprint in North America, but not significant commercial volumes: it's main area of growth is Canada and the northeastern United States and across the Great Lakes region. It has even been sighted all the way over to Alaska!

How is it used?

The wood is rather coarse-grained, hard, heavy, and relatively strong, with durable heartwood. It is used for planking, timbers, ties, poles, signposts, pilings and pulp. Historically, tamarack knees (the buttresses formed by large roots) were used in shipbuilding. Tamarack was also used for mud sills in home construction.

For construction uses, tamarack is graded under the National Grading Rule.

How much is used?

Annually, less than 10 million bd. ft. of tamarack lumber is manufactured by lumber mills located within the growing region.

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

Tamarack Fun Facts

- Native Americans located within its growing range used tamarack for numerous medicinal applications, with the outer bark and roots used to treat aches and pains, while the inner bark was frequently applied to hemorrhoids, frostbite, and small cuts for relief. Its tender spring shoots were even used as food.
- To aid in hunting, the Cree tribe created unique lifelike goose decoys from tamarack twigs. Handed down from generation to generation, these primitive handicrafts have become a coveted contemporary art form.
- Tamarack trees have a huge, long history in Minnesota: we're pretty sure woolly mammoths rubbed their backs on the trees to scratch an itch on their way to eat a saber-toothed tiger.