

Maine Tree Species Fact Sheet

Common Name: Balsam Poplar (Balm-of-Gilead, Balm Poplar, Tacamahac, Cottonwood, and Heartleaf Balsam Poplar)

Botanical Name: *Populus balsamifera*

Tree Type: Deciduous

Physical Description:

Growth Habit: Balsam poplar is a fast-growing, short-lived tree suited to a variety of planting sites, especially on sandy or wet soils. The bark on young trees is smooth, and greenish to reddish-brown. On older trees, it is gray-black in color and deeply furrowed. The leaves are simple, alternate; 3 to 6 inches long, ovate, long-pointed with finely toothed edges. They are deep dark green and shiny on the upper surface, light green with rusty blotches on the underside. The leaves turn yellow in the fall. The buds are large, pointed, golden-yellow, covered with a varnish-like resin and give off a balsam fragrance when they are expanding.

Height: The balsam poplar reaches a height of 30 – 70 feet with a trunk diameter of 15-30 inches. This species is hardy to Zone 3.

Shape: Balsam poplar is a moderate-sized tree, which grows upright with a narrow, open crown. The branches are stout, erect, and contorted at the ends.

Fruit/Seed Description/Dispersal Methods:

Balsam poplar flowers early in the spring, just before the leaves appear. The species is dioecious and the flowers are in catkins. Male flowers have 20-30 reddish stamens. Mature female catkins are 4 to 6 inches long. They are a lustrous green during development but turn dull green at the time of dispersal.

The fruit ripens the last of May or early in June. Each seed is attached to a cottony mass so that it is often carried long distances by the wind.

Range within Maine:

Balsam poplar inhabits the borders of swamps and the low bottomlands along rivers throughout the state, except in York County.

Distinguishing Features:

The leaves are a distinctive brownish-green with rust colored resin spots.

The tree gets its name from the fragrance of the resinous, sticky buds.



Interesting Features:

The wood is similar to quaking and bigtooth aspen, but not as strong, it is prone to decay while growing. The larger logs are sawed into landscaping ties. It can also be used for pulp, veneer, boxes, crates and brackets.

The large buds possess medicinal qualities. In early spring, the buds can be boiled in lard to make a salve for sprains, swellings and pulled muscles.

Relationship to Wildlife:

Moose, deer, elk, and other animals browse on balsam poplar buds, twigs, bark and seeds, but eat little foliage. Beaver frequently cut balsam poplar growing along watercourses. On small streams, ponds created by beaver dams can kill poplars growing in or adjacent to ponded areas.

Landscape Use:

This species typically grows along stream and swamp edges and is not very suitable for the home landscape.

Common Problems or Pests of the Tree in Maine:

Some insects that are commonly found on this species include the forest tent caterpillar, satin moth, gray willow leaf beetle and aspen leaf beetle. Balsam poplar is also susceptible to cankers, fungus, leaf and twig blight, and leaf spot.

References:

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http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/trees_shrubs/deciduous/balsampoplar.html

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http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/silvics_manual/volume_2/populus/balsamifera.htm

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