

February 2011 Tree of the Month

Thuja plicata, Western redcedar

Thuja plicata is the provincial tree of British Columbia. It thrives in wet, nutrient-rich soils and can be found growing along the coast from Southern Alaska to Northern California, and east into the Rockies. It has red-brown, furrowed bark that grows in long strips when the tree is mature. The leaves are scaly and flat, and branch in a lace-like pattern. It is a tall species – with enough water, nutrients, and time it can reach a height of 70 m (230ft) with a diameter of 4.3 m (14 ft), although most of those old-growth forests have been logged. If left to grow, a red cedar could live for 1000 years or more.

Western red cedar was introduced to cultivation in 1853. There are several cultivars, including 'Atrovirens', which is a popular hedge tree, and 'Zebrina', which has yellow-striped leaves.

The wood of mature red cedars contains fungicides that keep it from rotting. This means that fallen trees can last a long time before decaying. Giant stumps can still be found in forests around the lower mainland with springboard scars from logging in the 19th and early 20th centuries. This resistance to rot makes cedar wood a popular choice for shingles, decking, siding, and fencing, especially in our damp climate.

While the Western red cedar is a valuable and beloved tree in B.C. today, nothing can compare to the vital role it played in the lives of the first peoples on the northwest coast, who used the cedar for almost everything. They made rope, lines and fish traps from the skinny branches. They harvested the bark in long strips from live trees and beat it soft to make clothing, bedding, and bandaging. The bark and roots were woven into baskets, hats, mats, and nets. The light, fragrant, red wood was soft enough to be worked with tools made of stone and bone. From it they carved boxes, houses, cradles, coffins, tools, dishes, utensils, weapons, fishing hooks, canoes and totem poles. The wood is flexible when steamed, and they bent it into boxes and drum frames. They learned to harvest planks of wood without killing the trees, and you can still find old trees with healed scars from wood and bark harvesting – these are called culturally modified trees. Canoes and totem poles were carved from whole felled cedars. Some groups believed that you could gain strength from the cedar by standing with your back against the trunk, and the Haida of *Haida Gwaii* believed that those who killed the tree by harvesting all of its bark would be cursed.

Cedar carving is still an important part of the ceremonial culture of the First Peoples. Expert carvers create masks, canoes, totem poles and other items for their people, and teach their skills to their young apprentices. One of these carvers was Bill Reid, who carved wood, stone and metal, in the style of the Haida. He sums up his attitude toward *Thuja plicata* nicely in this quote:

“If we will only treat it with the respect in which [the First Peoples] held it, the great west coast cedar will always be with us, to serve with the same regal philanthropy it always has, as a powerfully beautiful asset to our coastal vistas when alive, and as a source of some of the finest materials for making objects of use and beauty.” - Bill Reid, in his forward to Hilary Stewart’s book, *Cedar* [Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver: 1984].

At VanDusen, Western red cedar can be found west of the ornamental grasses and in the Southern Hemisphere garden.