

Maine Tree Species Fact Sheet

Common Names: Tamarack (American Larch, Eastern Larch, Hackmatack)

Botanical name: *Larix laricina*



http://www.glf.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/os/bysea-immer/images/img_larix_laricina.jpg

Tree Type: Conifer

Physical Description:

Growth Habit: Tamarack is most commonly found in cool swampy places, although it also grows on well-drained soil. The leaves are soft and slender and resemble needles of true cedars. They are 3/8"-1" long on short spurs and grow in clusters of 8 or more on lateral shoots that are warty in appearance. The needles are bright green and turn yellow in September just before the fall. It is the only conifer that sheds all its leaves every fall. The bark is thin gray to reddish brown with rough circular scales. The wood is hard, strong and long-lasting when in contact with the soil. The root system of long tough root fibers can drop down 20 feet through a bog to get to a firm bottom.

Height: Tamarack grows to a height of 40-80 feet with a trunk diameter of 20 inches. One of the largest tamaracks recorded in Maine is 95 feet tall and 36.9 inches in diameter.

Shape: Tamarack has a regular, narrow, pyramidal head with small, stiff, horizontal branches and slender needles.

Fruit/Seed Description/Dispersal Methods:

In April and May, the tree produces greenish white 1" cones that resemble hemlock cones. After fertilization, the egg shaped cones become reddish brown. The small, ovoid cones are 1/2-3/4" long with less than 20 scales. They stand upright on branches and the scales spread open in the autumn and release seeds. The cones can remain on the branches for years and become gray in color. The seeds are oval in shape with a broad membranous wing surrounding them. This wing helps in the wide dispersal of seeds as they can be carried some distance by the wind.

Range within Maine:

Tamaracks can be found throughout the state, especially on limestone subsoil, sloping mountainsides, wet soils and bogs, and in borders of ancient glacial lakes. This species is hardy to Zone 3.

Distinguishing Features:

The tamarack has many needles in cluster, which drop in autumn; and small, stiff cones that remain on the tree for several years.

Relationship to Wildlife:

The seeds, needles and inner bark of the tamarack are eaten by the red crossbill, ruffed grouse, snowshoe hare, red squirrels, porcupine and deer.

Interesting Facts:

The root strings are very tough and fibrous and were used by Native Americans to sew birch bark canoes. They also used the bark for medicine.

Today, the rather coarse-grained, hard, heavy and strong wood is used for planking, timbers, railroad ties, fence posts, telephone poles, shipbuilding and turpentine (from its European cousin.)

Landscape Use:

Tamarack is esthetically appealing, especially in early autumn when its needles turn yellow. This tree has significant potential in the landscape because of its rapid growth and fall color. It should be noted that these trees are very messy as numerous branches are shed each winter. The tamarack is not suitable as a shade tree on city streets.

Common Problems or Pests of the Tree in Maine:

Because its bark is thin, tamarack is highly susceptible to fire damage. Strong winds can uproot large trees growing in swamps or other wet sites where rooting is shallow.

The larch sawfly is the most destructive insect enemy of the tamarack. The larch casebearer is also a serious defoliator of this tree.

Tamarack can also be affected by canker, frost injury, needle rust, and shoestring fungus.

References:

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