

Eastern White Cedar

If you were walking through wetlands and came upon a tree of the following description, what species would you have before you? Spiny aromatic evergreen, 6 to 10 m high; branchlets very flat, the tiny scale-like leaves overlapping in 4 rows; some branches terminating in small nodding ovoid cones, and some with minute staminate inflorescences. Obviously, you would have encountered eastern white cedar (Thuja occidentalis L.), also called Arbor-Vitae, the Tree of Life.

Numerous articles have been written on the medicinal uses of this tree. Many mention its use in treating scurvy, gout, fevers and rheumatism. The latter plagued the natives living in their damp woodlands, and scurvy was the horror of early white explorers.

Every Canadian is familiar with the hardship endured by Jacques Cartier and his crew while wintering on the St. Lawrence in 1535-36. Scurvy almost finished off the entire crew. However, as Cartier wrote to Francis I, King of France, a Huron-Iroquois medicine man gave his men a decoction of familiar scent, and all miraculously recovered from their stupor, gout and scorbutus. Equally familiar is the fact that Clusius of Fontainebleau, a courtier of Francis I, gave the name Arbor Vitae to Thuja. Ironically, the explorers who introduced the Tree of Life into France and Europe failed to learn its antiscorbutic use, and scurvy continued to threaten every explorer's life. In time, the British Navy discovered that citrus fruit was very antiscorbutic, and cedar lost its scurvy-treating place in medicine.

The natives, who displayed admirable ingenuity, made ointments of cedar leaves with bear's fat for treating coughs and rheumatism due to colds. During the course of time, the colonial laity learned to use the ointment for soothing relief from these discomforts. In 1978, North Americans buy plastic jars of similar compounds under brand names such as "Vick's Vaporub". Take a look at the label: "contains 4% oil of cedar leaf". The camphor-like compound responsible for the soothing effect is called sabinol (4 10 -Thujen-3-ol) or ericinol.

Today, Thuja has three major uses: as fenceposts, oil of cedar for ointments and as an ornamental.

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Crow Predation on a Snake

On May 4, 1978, at Nail Pond, West Prince County, I observed the unusual behavior of a crow preying on a garter snake. I first noticed the crow when it was under attack by a number of other crows and red-winged blackbirds. In an attempt to dodge its pursuers, it flew down and landed on the ice of the pond. At this point, I saw the snake writhing in the crow's beak. Since it was still early spring and rather cool out (+2°C) the snake was presumably sluggish and easy prey for the crow. After changing position of the snake in its bill several times, the crow flew to a nearby field. Here, it dropped and picked up the snake several times, and using the bill as a weapon it stabbed the snake five times. More attacks from a blackbird caused the crow to take its valuable prey and fly out of sight.

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