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The Quaking Aspen

by Paul J. Van Horn

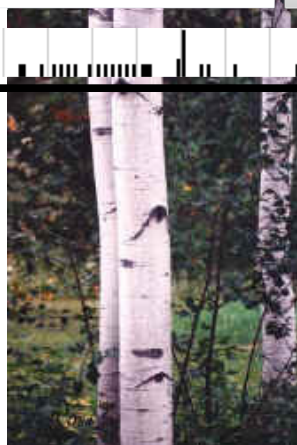


In September and October, many people flock to the high country of Colorado and other western states to view the beautiful colors of the changing leaves. The chief attraction for this pilgrimage are the vast groves of quaking aspen trees, whose oranges and brilliant yellows light up the mountains. In this case though, beauty is far more than skin deep. Aspen trees offer much more than visual appeal to the backcountry traveler. Food, medicine, and materials for a host of different tools can be found in great abundance in these forests.



The tree commonly known as quaking aspen holds the official Latin title of *Populus tremuloides*. It is a member of the poplar family that also includes willows and cottonwoods. Aspens are the most widely distributed native tree species in North America. They can be

found from coast to coast and from Alaska to Mexico. They are one of the dominant tree species in what is known as the Montaine Lifezone, which is generally found at elevations of 7,000 to 9,500 feet in Colorado. They aggressively colonize burned and cleared areas, most often reproducing by sending up shoots from their root system, resulting in extensive groves of genetically identical trees. They are, however, relatively short-lived trees, seldom living to over 100 years. Aspens are easy to identify by their smooth, white bark, and unique leaves.



As a food supply, aspens may not rival the cattail in variety, but they can provide a weary traveler with a bit of energy. The inner bark can be peeled and eaten. It is often quite bitter, but is more palatable in the spring. This layer is the food transportation network for the tree, so it contains a fair amount of sugar. People often find deer and elk in search of winter browse have chewed the bark.

The white powder found on the outside of the tree contains a good quantity of naturally occurring yeast. A sourdough bread mix kicked off with this powder will add some leavening and a great flavor to bread, pancakes, and other baked goods. Try scraping off a few teaspoonfuls, and add it to a soupy mix of flour and water. Throw in a tablespoon of sugar for good measure and wait a few days, stirring each day. The mix should begin to foam and smell "yeasty." Once this has occurred, add a portion of the mix to a bread dough recipe, replacing what you remove to perpetuate the starter. Check out a good cookbook for specific recipes for making sourdough bread.

The poplar family is well known for its medicinal qualities. The leaves, buds, and inner bark of all the poplars contain varying amounts of populin and salicin. These chemicals add up to a natural form of our synthesized aspirin. The inner bark or leaves may be steeped in water for a pain-relieving tea. In addition, the buds may be placed in a jar with olive oil to make a soothing salve for skin irritations and abrasions. The white powder found on the outer bark makes a good emergency sunscreen.

Finally, twigs can be chewed to fiber, and used to good effect as a toothbrush.

The aspen also provides an abundance of materials for the construction of a variety of wilderness living tools. The wood works reasonably well as both a spindle and fireboard in the bow drill method of fire starting. A large diameter spindle (1-1/2 in.), combined with a high speed/lower downward pressure technique usually yields good results. Mors Kochanski, in his book *Bushcraft* advises looking for trees that have either lost their bark and weathered to a gray color, or trees that have been attacked by a fungus, leaving light, firm, balsa-like wood.

The dead, fibrous inner bark, although sparky, makes good tinder. A coal carrier can be made of this bark by putting a sizable wad of it in between two pieces of outer bark, and loosely tying the bundle together. With minimal maintenance, a coal will last for several hours, slowly smoldering away in its oxygen-poor cocoon.

As firewood, aspen appears low on the list of woods in terms of the amount of heat it provides. Aspen provides approximately 16.5 million British Thermal Units (BTUs) per cord, compared to about

20 million for most oaks. This means you have to burn nearly twice as much aspen as oak to generate the same amount of heat. It is, how-
ever, a very good firewood. It tends to spark quite a bit, so be careful if you intend to sleep nearby!

The wood, being soft, even grained, and tasteless, works well for utensils, such as bowls, spoons, cups, and anytime you need a lightweight, moderately strong wood. If you use aspen for making bowls, make sure the piece you select is completely dry and without checks, or it may crack after you have begun carving. A bowl may be burned-out by placing a coal on top of the blank piece of wood, and blowing until the surrounding wood begins to burn. After a time, scrape out this char, and continue burning. When you have attained the shape you desire, sand the bowl down with a piece of sandstone, and finish it with mineral oil. Alternately, a good crooked knife makes short work of the soft, even-grained wood.



The thick, somewhat brittle outer bark can be peeled easily in the spring, scored, and carefully folded into a nice-looking basket. Finish the rim with split willows, and tie it and the sides with spruce roots.

Shelter materials are easy to find in an aspen forest. Young aspens often grow in dense stands. Because of this, many die as the grove matures. This leaves a large number of wrist-sized, fairly straight poles for the woodsman to use in the construction of shelters, cooking setups, and other camp fixtures. When larger aspens die and begin to decay, their bark can often be peeled off in large pieces for roof shingles. In addition, the ground cover of fallen leaves, although much thinner than that of other forests, can be gathered together for litter beds or shelter cover.

The aspen can be found all over North America. It offers food, shelter, fire, and tools to the backcountry traveler. The student of traditional skills should take the time to learn about this great tree.



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