



Canoe Country Plants

It seems almost impossible, as you look across the horizon, to begin to separate the thousands of plant species native to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) and the Quetico Provincial Park. At a closer look you begin to distinguish between the varying shades of green - the moment of discovery has begun!

We will begin to introduce you to some of the more common plants native to our area. Unfortunately, due to space restrictions, we cannot introduce you to all of the species you may encounter. For additional information on all of the north woods plants, consult a North American Plant Field Guide.

TREES

WHITE PINE - The white pine is a familiar sight. Its cluster of five soft thin needles gives it a delicate appearance when young. As the pine matures it stands out on the shoreline with its impressive size. Used during the logging era as main masts for ships, the white pine is now a common sanctuary for bald eagle and osprey nests.

RED PINE - Red pines grow to tremendous size, also. You can distinguish them from the white pine by their long clusters of two needles (approximately 4 or more inches in length). The bark of a red pine will also have a reddish cast.

JACK PINE - Like the red pine, the jack pine also have clusters of two needles. You can distinguish the two from each other by the short length of the jack pine needles (typically less than 2-1/2 inches in length) and the gnarly, rough appearance of its limbs and bark.

SPRUCES - Both black and white spruce inhabit our area. Spruce have individual needles attached directly to the branch. The needles grow around the entire circumference of the branch, the individual needles are roundish in shape.

BALSAM FIR - At first appearance, the balsam fir looks much the same as the spruce. Several differences do exist which will make possible distinguishing between the two. The balsam fir grows needles only on two sides of the branch - rather than all the way around as the spruce does. The balsam needles are also flat and have a faint white stripe on the underside of the needle.

TAMARACK - Traveling through wet, marshy areas you will undoubtedly encounter Tamarack. Tamarack have clusters of very light green needles about one to two inches long randomly dispersed throughout its branches. The Tamarack never really fills out and will have a sparse, almost sickly appearance. Many of the north woods lakes receive their lightly stained color from the acids emitted from the Tamarack's roots.

CEDAR - A deer's favorite winter meal consists of cedar; an unusual and unique looking tree. The cedar has flat groupings of scaly leaves or needles. Cedars love low-lying wet areas especially near rapids and shorelines. The light brown scruffy looking bark hides a strong wood excellent for building. The cedar also has a refreshing scent.

BIRCH - It is a temptation to pull the white peeling bark from a birch tree, but please don't. Removing bark from trees exposes it to bugs and disease and a certain death. Young birch trees have a deep reddish brown bark.

ASPEN - Both the quaking and large-toothed aspen are native to our wilderness areas. The creamy light green bark and "trembling sound" of their rustling leaves will help you to identify them. Aspen grow quickly and reproduce through an underground root system that produces "suckers" or young trees.



SHRUBS

DOGWOOD - Red Osier dogwood is a common low growing shrub. Its deep red bark, with white flowers in spring and white berries in summer, give it a distinctive look. To tell if you have a dogwood, gently split the leaf in half. If the leaf holds together by thin transparent fibers, you have found a member of the dogwood family

HAZEL - Another low growing shrub that grows throughout the north woods is beaked hazel. Beaked hazel can be distinguished by its grayish light brown bark with white speckles

ALDERS - A common meal for beavers, alders grow in marshy wet areas and along shorelines. Often, they grow directly out of the shallow water. Their dark brown bark, deep green leaves, catkins (long thin yellow growths) and fruits (small brown pine cones) help identify them from other shoreline shrubs.

LABRADOR TEA - Common to wetlands and cedar and spruce bogs, Labrador tea is a low growing shrub. The leaves are long, narrow and leathery with a soft muted green color. Labrador tea was commonly collected by Native American and voyageurs and dried for tobacco and tea.

OTHER PLANTS

BUNCHBERRY - A low-lying plant often seen along portage trails, bunchberry consists of whorls of four or six leaves. Plants having white flowers in the spring or red berries in the summer will consist of six leaves.

WILD SARSAPARILLA - Wild sarsaparilla is an unusual looking plant. A main stalk rises from the ground which then splits into three branches. Each of the branches typically has five leaves. Greenish-white flowers adorn the plant in the spring and deep purple to black berries appear in the summer.

BLUE-BEAD LILY - Search out the shady spots of a portage trail to find a unique treasure - the Blue-bead lily. With a set of three "lily" petals and a single stalk rising from the center, the Blue-bead lily has a cluster of light green flowers in the spring that develop into brilliant blue beads in June. The "beads" resemble small plums and are very poisonous.

EDIBLE PLANTS AND BERRIES

The BWCA and Quetico Provincial Park have a variety of edible plants and berries. Blueberries, raspberries, pin cherries and many others can be found throughout your travels. Remember, however, if you aren't sure of the plant you plan to eat or eat from, DON'T EAT IT! Always practice common sense and remember that you are traveling in a wilderness area. Immediate medical attention can be a day or more away.