

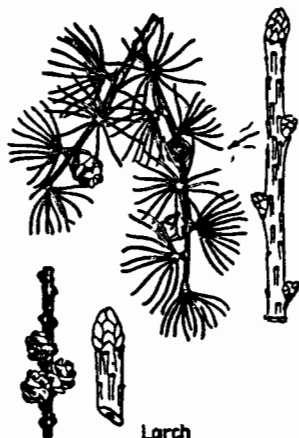
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Natural History Notes

MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area, attended Hayward Public Schools, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, University of Minnesota, and Iowa State University. He has a Ph. D. in Fisheries Biology. Mike has worked as an area fishing guide, taught Zoology at UW-Stevens Point, and is now a fisheries biologist with the USDA Forest Service, living in Park Falls, Wisconsin.

THE TAMARACK



The larch, tamarack, or hackmatack are all common names of one of America's two native deciduous conebearing trees. The bald cypress is the other. There are three species of larch indigenous to North America: the eastern, western and subalpine. Here in northern Wisconsin we have the eastern larch.

Larches have the widest natural range of any North American conifer. They can be found from the Atlantic Ocean to the Yukon, north to the Arctic circle and along Hudson Bay. The tamarack is found throughout much of Canada, New England, New York, Michigan, Wisconsin, Minnesota and parts of Pennsylvania. It is found from sea level to 4,000 feet.

In the northern part of its range, the tamarack prefers well-drained uplands. In the southern part, including New England and the Great Lakes area, the tamarack is found in cool sphagnum bogs or swamps. Larches may be found in pure stands, in which case the trees are quite crowded. Otherwise the larch is found most often with spruce, hemlock, fir, alder, cedar and willow.

The wood of the tamarack isn't important commercially, although it does have many uses. The coarse-grained wood is strong, hard and heavy and is quite durable when in contact with the soil. For these reasons it is a good choice for telephone poles, fencing, railroad ties and even shipbuilding. The Indians used to use the roots for building their

canoes. The wood weighs 39 lbs. per cubic foot when dry and has a reddish-brown heartwood and a thick light yellow sapwood.

The leaves are one of the most attractive features of the tamarack. The soft, bright green thread-like leaves are a most welcome sign that spring is here. Triangular in cross-section, the leaves are arranged singly in a spiral on the new growth. Older branches have about 20 leaves arranged in whorled bunches. The leaves, which are shed each fall, are about an inch long and rounded on the upper side and sharply keeled on the lower.

The 1/2 - 3/4 inch thick bark is grayish brown with rounded scales on the older trees and smooth and light orange on the young ones. Cones on the tamarack develop early each spring. About an inch long, they grow erect on the branches, mature in one season, and will remain on the tree for several years before falling intact. The cones are bright red at first and then turn darker and are finally chestnut brown when ripe.

The tamarack is a straight and slender tree. At maturity they attain an average height of 50-60' and a diameter of 18-20'', although sometimes trees more than twice that height and 2 ft. in diameter have been found. Toward the Arctic Circle, the northern boundary of its range, the tree's growth is dwarfed. The larch has a broad, shallow root system which makes it well adapted to growing on swampy ground; however, its best growth is in fresh well-drained soil. Branches of this tree often twist and on a full grown tree are spreading and pendulous. The young trees have a narrow pyramidal shape and a flexible terminal shoot. As the tree matures the shape becomes irregular and if grown in the open may develop a low broad crown. The tamarack takes 100-200 years to mature.

Fire is the tamarack's worst enemy but larch sawfly can also be quite dangerous to this tree. This small pest has defoliated an entire tamarack forest. Fungi are another problem to the larch. These include mushroom root rot, yellow root rot, rot of larch, canker of larch and larch leaf cast.

All in all, the tamarack is an unusual and attractive tree. The tracery of its sparse bare branches will soon give way to its delicate bright green summer foliage and nature's cycle starts again.