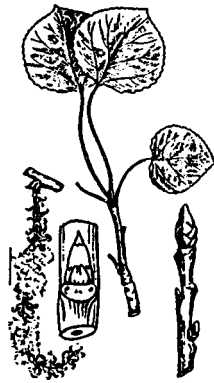




Natural History Notes

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THE QUAKING ASPEN



A familiar sight here in northern Wisconsin is the quaking aspen, also appropriately named *Populus tremuloides* and locally called the popple. Other common names for this tree are the trembling, American, and small-toothed cottonwoods, and its closest relative is the big toothed aspen. The quaking aspen is the most widely distributed tree in North America. It is found from Labrador to Alaska, south to Kentucky and Virginia, and in the Rocky Mountains down to Mexico.

This aspen is a relatively fast growing and short-lived tree with a life span approximating that of humans. Average height at maturity is 50-60 feet and average diameter is 1 to 1.5 feet. Some individual specimens, however, will grow much larger, some up to 100 feet tall. The name quaking aspen is derived from its leaves that tremble or quake in the slightest breeze. The leaf stalk or petiole is long (as long as the leaf blade), slender, flexible, flattened, and set at right angles to the leaf. The leaf is one to two inches long, round or slightly oval with toothed edges, thin but firm, shiny green above, and duller green underneath. Another key characteristic of the younger trees is the white to light yellowish-green thin smooth bark. As the tree ages the bark becomes furrowed, thick, and turns dark gray. The trunk is straight and tapers to a narrow rounded crown of sparse foliage. The branches are slender and brittle.

The flowers of the quaking aspen are drooping catkins 1 to 1.5 inches long. Male and female flowers are found on different trees. The catkins appear before the tree leaf out in the spring. Both the pollen and seeds are carried by the wind. The seeds have a tuft of silk that aids in wind dispersal. At times the seeds are so numerous they look like cotton covering the ground or water.

The quaking aspen is a hardy tree being able to withstand both flood and drought. They will grow in almost every highland soil type but do best in sandy and gravelly soils. They are often found growing in pure stands. They spread easily from suckers and all the trees in a particular grove may be clones of the original tree. This means they will be genetically identical and near perfect replicas having the same branching patterns, and will leaf out and turn color at the same time. Ecologically, the quaking aspen is a pioneer species. After clear cutting, fire, or on an abandoned road it is the first tree to become established. If it is cut, the species will be regenerated by the suckers from the roots. But if it is left to mature and die it will give way to species such as maples, birches and conifers.

The wood of the quaking aspen is soft, weak, and light. The closely grained silky wood decays easily. It is America's leading pulpwood tree. The wood is also used for boxes, matches, particle board, excelsior, and certain furniture parts. It is also a very important wildlife tree, supporting many animal species. Many cavity-nesting birds, such as woodpeckers and wood ducks, make their nests in old decaying quaking aspen. The tender young leaves and twigs are browse for rabbits, deer, elk, moose, and many other animals. Grouse and quail feed on the buds during the winter and it is the mainstay of the beaver's diet. In addition to being important to our timbering economy, quaking aspen is critical to the survival of many, many animals.