

Practical uses

The birch tree is, arguably, the most versatile tree in the northern forest. Every part of the tree has been used at one time or another by indigenous peoples. Cultures throughout the northern hemisphere have age-old traditions relating to the use of birch.

TRADITIONAL

Native peoples predominantly used sheets of bark. The sheets were shaped by folding, with or without cutting, strengthened and reinforced with stem material from willows, hazel and other species and laced together with materials such as spruce and willow root, and cedar and basswood inner bark. When sealed with pine pitch or spruce resin, the container could be used to carry water or hung over a fire to cook a soup or stew. Baskets of all sizes and shapes were made for use in gathering, preparing, cooking, and storing food, and transportation.

The most renowned of these "baskets" was the birch bark canoe. Lightweight and easily portable, a canoe made of birch bark could still carry heavy loads. An average-sized canoe was light enough to be carried by one person, and could be used in small streams as well as in the larger rivers.

Birch bark weaving seems to have been predominant in northern Europe and northern Asia (Siberia). Woven items cover a huge range of shapes and include baskets of many sizes, shoes, jewelry, mats, knife handles and sheaths.

Dwellings called wigwams were made using a framework of saplings, covered with overlapping layers of birch bark.

TIMBER

Birch wood is fine-grained and pale in colour, often with an attractive satin-like sheen. It is suitable for veneer, and birch ply is among the strongest and most dimensionally stable plywoods.

Due to birch pulp's short-fibre qualities, this hardwood can be used to make printing paper. In India the thin bark coming off in winter was used as writing paper. This has excellent life. The paper is known as bhoorj patra – literally "tree paper".

Birch twigs were bound in a bundle, also called birch, to be used for birching, a form of corporal punishment.

Birch is used as firewood due to its high calorific value per unit weight and unit volume. The bark is also used in starting fires. The bark will burn very well, even when wet, because of the oils it contains. With care, the bark can be split into very thin sheets that will ignite from even the smallest of sparks.

MUSIC

Baltic Birch is among the most sought after wood in the manufacture of speaker cabinets. Birch has a natural resonance that peaks in the high and low frequencies. This resonance compensates for the roll-off of low and high frequencies in the speakers, and evens the tone. Birch is known for having "natural EQ."

Birch drums have a natural boost in the high and low frequencies, which allow the drums to sound fuller.

Birch wood is sometimes used as a tonewood for semi-acoustic and acoustic guitar bodies and occasionally used for solid-body guitar bodies. It is also a common material used in mallets for keyboard percussion.

FOOD

In Belarus, Russia, the Baltic States, Finland, and parts of northern China, birch sap is consumed as a refreshing beverage, and is believed to have tonic qualities. It is watery, with a slightly sweet flavour, and is bottled commercially. The sap of particular birch species may also be rendered into birch syrup, vinegar, birch beer and wine. Xylitol can also be extracted from birch, a sugar alcohol artificial sweetener, which has shown effectiveness in preventing, and in some cases repairing, tooth decay.