

AMERICAN ASPEN by R. C. MACKENZIE

A friend in England, who is an enthusiastic gardener, writes that he has an American Aspen in his garden, of which he is very proud. He mentions the rich green of its leaves in summer, the glowing gold of its autumn color.

American Aspen, more commonly known as White Poplar, is the commonest tree in this Province. Is it then without honor in its own land? Yielding a soft wood, for which there is at present little demand -- rarely planted in windbreak or garden -- it is sometimes spoken of as a tree weed.

Soon the Poplar Woods will awake in a misty greenery of new growth. First the long drooping catkins, silver-grey tassels for the new green curtain of spring, then as a thousand leaf-buds slowly open, the green mist creeps slowly steadily northward, from prairie bluffs to parklands and throughout the northern forests.

This Aspen, or White Poplar, as we seem to prefer to call it, is a very attractive tree. Usually from twenty to forty feet high, its brownish green bark is covered with a white powdery substance, giving it the appearance of being white barked. The leaves are smooth, fine toothed, ovate to almost heart-shaped, darker -- almost olive green above and lighter green below -- always wind-stirred, always musically moving.

Few trees are as well known or are distributed over so wide an area. It has many names. In the East it has been called Popple, Quaking Asp, Smooth-barked Poplar, and Aspen. In the mountains of the West it is called White Poplar, White Asp and Mountain Aspen. It is defined by botanists as *Populus Tremuloides*, the trembling poplar, because of the way its leaf stems are fastened sideways, making them very unstable and causing them to tremble with every movement of air.

It is a prolific seeder. The minute light seed, attached to a downy tuft, is carried miles by the wind. In sheltered coulees on the north slopes of dry hills, or in lonesome stunted windswept bluffs, it is found far out upon the open plains. Aspen climbs to high altitudes in the mountains, often forming part of the timber line. It extends along the valleys and in fall forms spots of gold among pine and spruce forests on high rocky slopes. It reaches far northward, sometimes to the limit of trees.

The wood has many uses. It is the principal source of firewood in the north and west and throughout the prairie region. Farmers and ranchers use it for poles, for corrals and fences and, in some districts, for building-logs. It is one of the best woods for making boxes and barrels for food-stuffs, since it has no odor and holds nails well. Excelsior is made from it. A plywood made from it has proved useful in certain kinds of interior finishing.

Aspen is the principal food of beavers and the material from which most of their dams are constructed. The natural irrigation and water conservation carried on by these builders of dams, would not be possible without an abundance of poplar logs and branches near by.

Subject to fungus attacks, its life-span in some regions is less than thirty years, but in the forests of north central Saskatchewan, where it lives under very favorable conditions, it sometimes reaches an age of eighty years, a diameter of two feet, and a height of over seventy feet.

In the lightest breeze the leaves of Aspen are always musically moving. This is the tree's best known characteristic. The chattering Aspen is the singing tree of the poets and musicians -- the tree with talking leaves -- June's pattering whisper of trembling sounds which have been interpreted into both music and poetry.

Blue skies and green Aspen woods. Tall slim poplars beside the lake. Such are the memories left with us of this very common tree.