

Cedar — A Great Provider

*Oh, the cedar tree!
If mankind in his infancy
had prayed for the perfect substance
for all material and aesthetic needs,
an indulgent god could have provided
nothing better.*

Bill Reid

Scientists call it *Thuja plicata* or Western red cedar. The Nuu-chah-nulth call it *humis*, the Haida name is *tsu* and the Ktunaxa word for it is *?iʔnat*. Red-cedar is found in British Columbia, along the entire coast and in the interior valleys and low mountain slopes south of Prince George. Cedars can grow up to 75 m (250 feet) tall and 5.5 m (18 feet) in diameter; they have been known to live 1,500 years. Their wood cells contain high concentrations of tannins, aromatic oils and resins that inhibit the growth of wood-decomposing fungi and bacteria. This high rot-resistance along with its straight grain, light weight and thin fibrous bark have made the cedar a very useful tree to the Aboriginal Peoples of British Columbia.

Another type of cedar, rarely found in the interior, is the yellow-cedar (*Chamaecyparis nootkatensis*), prized for its bark and, to a lesser degree, its wood. From these two cedars the Aboriginal Peoples obtained the materials to provide them with shelter, clothing, tools and transportation. From cradles to mortuary boxes, from birth until death, cedar was a versatile provider.

An infant child was placed in a cradle made of red-cedar boards and lined with yellow-cedar bark and sphagnum moss. The blanket, mattress and pillow were made of yellow-cedar bark, pounded until soft and fluffy.

In the spring, young girls went with their mothers and grandmothers to the forest to collect the bark. They searched for a tree about 40 cm (16 in.) in diameter, that was straight and tall, and had few lower branches. When they found the tree they wanted, they would stand under it and say a prayer, such as this one, said many years ago by a Kwakwaka'wakw woman:

Look at me friend!
I come to ask for your dress,
For you have pity on us;
For there is nothing for which you cannot be used...
For you are really willing to give us your dress,
I come to beg you for this,
Long-lifemaker
For I am going to make a basket for lily-roots out of you.

To strip the bark from the tree, the women made a horizontal cut in the bark, several feet from the ground, for a third of the circumference of the tree. Then they inserted an adze under all the layers of bark and slowly, taking care not to split it, pulled upward and outward until it came free of the tree leaving a long V-shaped scar. They separated the soft, pliable inner bark from the brittle outer bark and then rolled it up, sap side in, and took it home and hung it up to dry for later use. The dried bark was separated into layers and then cut into strips ready for making articles such as baskets, rope or mats. Preparation of yellow-cedar bark was more time consuming:

it had to be soaked and boiled to remove the pitch. Woven robes, hats and capes made from the fine, soft yellow-cedar bark repelled water and protected people from the rain.

In more open areas, women pulled up cedar roots from the ground beyond the overhanging branches of a tree where the roots were new and pliable. They removed the outer bark from these roots and split them lengthwise in preparation for weaving baskets and cradles. By watching her elders, a young woman would learn how to weave storage and heavy-burden baskets.

Women also used the long, slender red-cedar branches or withes to make rope, binding material and open-weave baskets. They heated the withes over an open fire until the sap steamed. This loosened the bark so that it could be removed by squeezing the withes through wooden tongs. The women twisted the warm withes and stored them until they were needed.

Cedar was also an important part of everyday life for men. At a young age a male learned how to select a tree to make a house post, a totem pole or a canoe. He and his kin ventured into the forest, often kilometres from home, to find the right tree. To make a canoe, the men selected a straight, tall tree with even growth. They cut a small hole into it to "feel the heart" and to judge its soundness. Then they prayed, "do not fall too heavily, else you, great magician will be broken". After felling the tree, the men roughly shaped it to lessen its weight. Then they dragged the preformed canoe to the nearest water and towed it back to their village for completion. Canoes could be small enough to suit one person or large enough for thirty people.

Young men learned how to split planks off standing trees, a technique that kept the trees alive. The Kwakwaka'wakw called these planks "begged from" cedars. Planks were used for many purposes including bent wood containers, house siding and roofing. Bent wood boxes had many uses, from cooking to storage of ceremonial regalia.

Cedar remains important in the lives of Aboriginal peoples. Wood and bark are used for the construction of ceremonial bighouses and in making canoes, totem poles, boxes, mats baskets and hats.

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