

THE ASPEN TREE

The Aspen is a mid-sized deciduous tree and will grow to a height of 20 to 80 feet. It is renowned for its golden autumn foliage. They are the only broadleaf tree in the Rocky Mountains. The Aspen is the most widely distributed tree in North America and the second most widely distributed in the world. Aspens live in the western states at higher elevations, usually between 6,500 and 10,000 feet, in high plateaus and alpine areas.

Aspen wood is white and soft, but fairly strong, and has low flammability. It has a number of uses, notably for making matches and paper where its low flammability makes it safer to use than most other woods.

“The Aspen Eye”

Ever felt like you were being watched while hiking through a grove of Aspen trees? Look a little closer next time. You may see the “Aspen Eyes” looking back at you.



Photos by Jill Ferguson Mt. Lemmon 2017

Quaking Aspens are shade-intolerant, and as these trees grow taller, they are in a constant race upwards for the sun with their close neighbors in the aspen grove. Their lower branches eventually become shaded, so the Quaking Aspens cut off the flow of sap to these lower branches, causing them to atrophy and fall off, leaving a dark eye where each self-pruned branch used to be. This allows the trees to only expend their limited energy on the more productive, sunlit upper branches. When slower growing pine trees overtake the aspens in height, the Aspens die out due to lack of sun.

The Aspen “quake”

You may have noticed while in a grove of Aspens that the whole forest seems to be moving as the Aspen leaves flutter with the slightest breeze. Quaking Aspen features small, round leaves with a shiny green top and dull green underside. The leaves flutter or “quake” because the stems of the leaves are flat rather than round like most stems; thus the wind causes them to flutter and make a soft whispering sound.

The Aspen root system

When fires destroy trees the amazing Aspen root system is protected from the fire under the soil and the fast growing Aspen cycle back ahead of the other trees and vegetation. The Aspen can grow up to 24 inches a year. Unaided, this humble but sturdy little tree has restored many of the forests that man has destroyed and, when cultivated, has replenished many harvested forests within 50 years.

Aspens are aided by the rhizomatic of their root systems. Most aspens grow in large clonal colonies, derived from a single seedling, and spread by means of root suckers; stems in the colony may appear at up to 100–130 feet from the parent tree. Each individual tree can live for 40–150 years above ground, but the root system of the colony is long-lived. In some cases, this is for thousands of years, sending up new trunks as the older trunks die off above ground. For this reason, it is considered to be an indicator of ancient woodlands. One such colony in Utah, given the nickname of “Pando” is estimated to be **80,000** years old, making it possibly the oldest living colony of aspens!! In human standards the Aspen tree is almost immortal.

Aspen legends

Indians believed that the wind was the messenger of the gods. Anything closely associated to it, like aspen was deemed sacred.

In France, it was a religious belief that the leaves shook with fear because Christ’s cross was made from Aspen wood.

In Germany, it was said that the Aspen was the only tree that refused to acknowledge him, so Jesus had placed a curse on the Aspen which caused the tree to tremble in fear.

Celtic warriors used Aspen wood for shields in battle.

Prepared by Terry Ferguson in October 2017

Sources: Wikipedia, and various other web sites