

Everything is One Case Study: Cedar

Overview

Western Redcedar (*Thuja plicata*)

The Western redcedar is also called the “Tree of Life” because of its central importance to Pacific Coastal First Nations. It is held in the highest respect by First Peoples for its strength and spiritual powers. It has easy-to split and rot-resistant wood, and a soft inner bark that is both insulating and waterproof. Western redcedar was used to make everything from longhouses, canoes, totem poles, baskets, rope, clothing, hats, hunting and fishing tools and nets, masks, drum frames, medicines and much more! Cedar wood was also used as a fuel, especially to dry fish, because it burns with little smoke. Western redcedar was a fundamental part of peoples’ lives beginning when they were babies asleep in woven cedar bark cradles until they went to their final resting place in cedar bentwood boxes (coffins).

Cedar isn’t just a source of materials. It is revered as an elder. Any harvest follows strict protocol including asking for permission to harvest and giving thanks for the gifts. The harvest is a sacred process that must be done with a good heart and good mind. Nothing is wasted and what is received is a gift to be shared. The harvesting of cedar bark was done by women only at certain times of the year. Cuts to harvest bark are made only on the sunny side of the tree to promote healing. Only certain sized trees are allowed to have their bark harvested, and there are rules as to how wide the cut should be to harvest the bark. Trees weren’t often felled; planks and bark could be harvested off living trees. When a tree fell everything from trunk to branches and roots were used.

Yellow cedar (*Chamaecyparis nootkatensis*) is found in higher elevations and moist, boggy sites. Like Western redcedar, Yellow cedar also has many similar and important uses.

The importance of Western redcedar is revealed by the many different names for the tree in the SENĆOŦEN language of the WSANEC people on Southern Vancouver Island, including:

- XPÁY: tree, wood, cedar canoe, cedar post
- XEXPÅ: plank
- JELÅ:bark (general), outer bark
- SLEWI: inner bark
- ÁSES: boughs, branches
- SŦESTÁSES: strong and thin, flexible branches used to bind things or make rope (withes)
- XÆEXTEN: rope made from cedar branches
- ŦEMLEX: roots

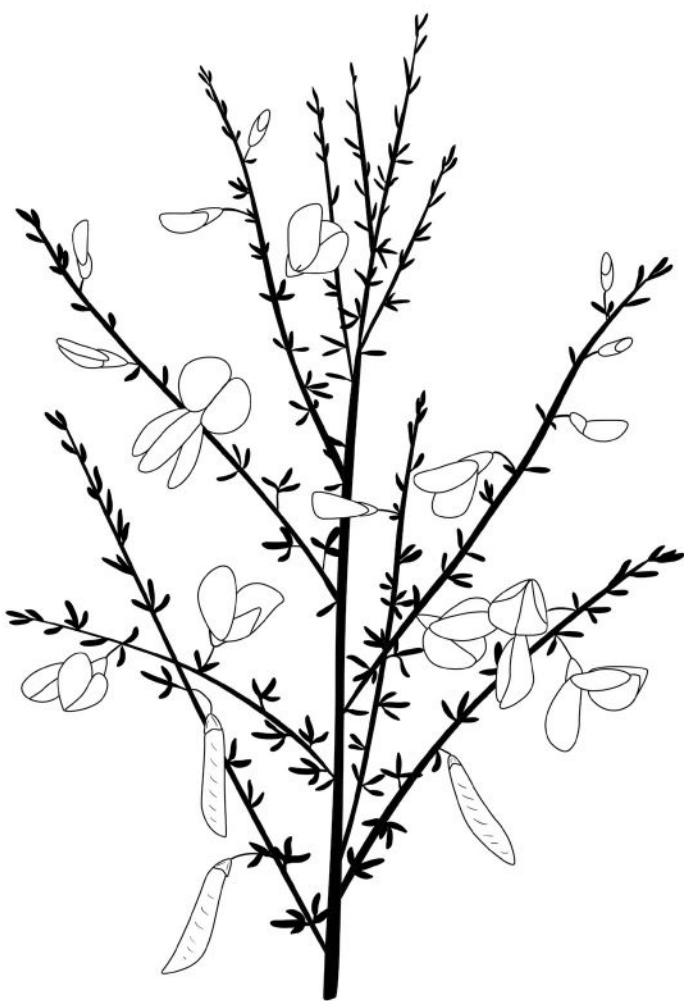
(From Saanich Ethnobotany: Culturally Important Plants of the WSANEC People, Nancy J. Turner and Richard J. Hebda. Royal BC Museum, 2019.)

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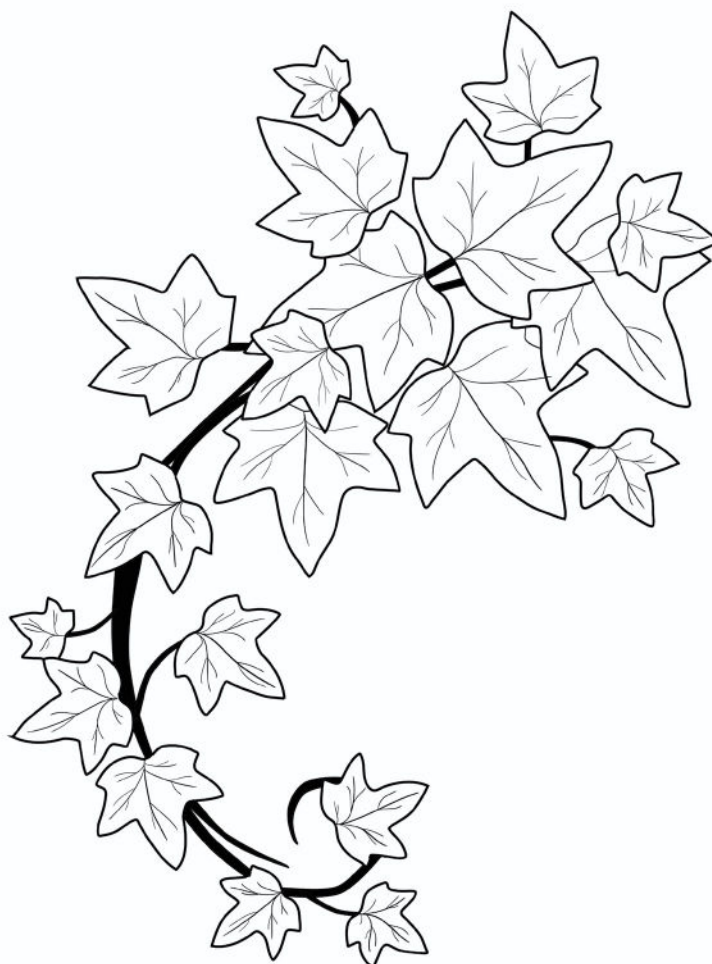
Invasive Species Impacts

Invasive plants that impact Western redcedar include English ivy and Scotch broom. Ivy can grow in a thick mat and grow up trees, blocking them from light and weighing them down. It can also prevent cedar seedlings from germinating. Scotch broom has a deep taproot that can hog water. It has a high oil content that can fuel fires. Western redcedar is not fire tolerant and grows best in cool, shady forests.

Scotch broom
(*Cytissus scoparia*)



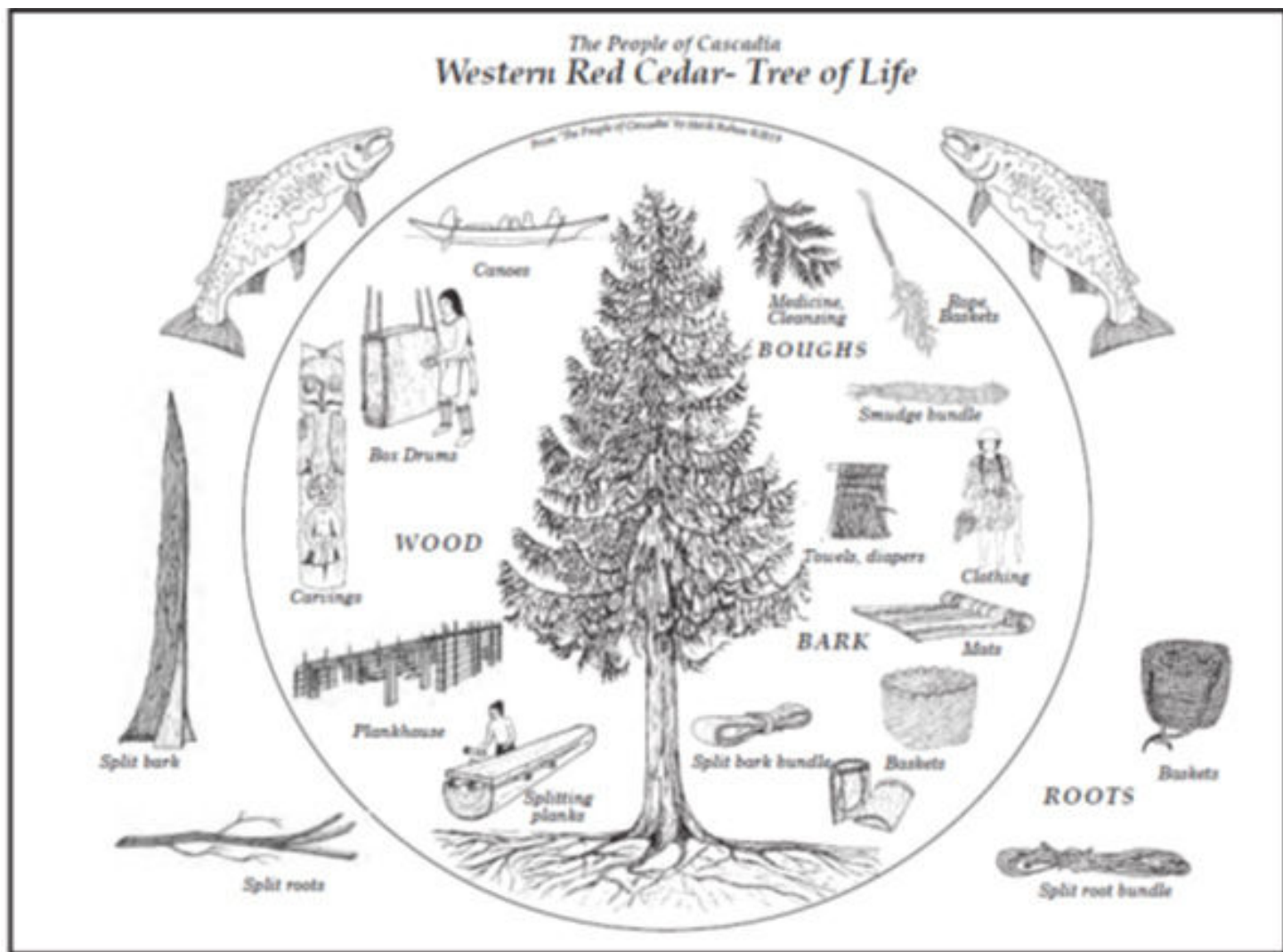
English ivy
(*Hedera helix*)



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Western Redcedar: Tree Of Life

What is Western redcedar used for by Coastal First Peoples?



The People of Cascadia: Pacific Northwest Native American History. Heidi Bohan, 2009

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Western Redcedar: Tree Of Life

What do you see in the historic photograph of the Haida village that was likely made from Western redcedar?



Haida Gwaii, in 1878; photograph by George M. Dawson. Image courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives

Cedar Harvest

- **Drawings: Respectful Harvesting of Cedar Bark from the Tree of Life; and Words of Praise- Prayer to a Young Cedar.** (From *Staying the Course, Staying Alive- Coastal First Nations Fundamental Truths: Biodiversity, Stewardship and Sustainability*. 2009. Frank Brown and Y. Kathy Brown (Compilers) Biodiversity BC. Victoria, BC. 82 pp. [Read](#))
- **Cedar Bark Harvesting with Metlakatla Elder Fanny Nelson**, by Lonnie Wishart [Watch](#)

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Words of Praise Prayer to a Young Cedar

This woman goes into the woods to look for young cedar trees. As soon as she finds them, she picks out one that has no twists in the bark, and whose bark is not too thick. She takes her adze and stands under the young tree, and looking up to it, she prays, saying:



*Look at me friend,
I, come to ask for your dress
For you have come to take 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-life maker,
For I am going to make a basket for lily roots out of you.*

*I pray, friend, do not feel angry
On account of what I am going to do to you;
And I beg you friend, to tell our friends about what I ask you!*

*Take care friend!
Keep sickness away from me,
So that I may not be killed by sickness and in war,
O friend!*

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Additional Examples

- **The Story of Cedar** – Herb Rice, Cowichan Carver, Video (7:47). Clip from the documentary, The Story of Cedar, featuring Coast Salish carvers, cedar weavers, drum makers and artists who either work with cedar, or who have incorporated elements of cedar, "the tree of life", into their work. This clip includes legends and Spiritual connections to Western redcedar
[Watch](#)
- Cedar Weaving – Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, Video (2:59). Women from the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, QúQú Héy Yóóch— "Bernadine Billy", Txwolt'malh—"Holly Joseph" and n' áń attw Nkakúsene— "Tanina Williams" give a demonstration of weaving cedar for rope, mats, clothing, and baskets and discuss types of cedar and how and when cedar is harvested
[Watch](#)

