



## All About Aspen

Aspen (*Populus tremula*) is one of the rarest and most beautiful of Scotland's native trees. Despite its rarity here, Aspen is the most common and widespread broadleaved tree in the world, found in a wide belt across the Northern Hemisphere. Aspen was the first tree to colonise the British Isles following the last Ice Age. It is *the* pioneer tree and is therefore very tolerant of a wide range of conditions. It can grow on very thin and poor soils and also can grow at high altitudes of up to 550m as well as on the coast. There are thought to be only about 600 locations where aspen grows across the whole of Scotland and it is often found only as solitary trees.

Aspen is uncommon in Scotland because it rarely produces seed. It is also very palatable for a wide range of animals and it also intolerant to shade. Consequently due to the way the countryside is managed today there are few places where it can thrive and has been forced to the margins on cliffs and remote river gullies.



Harmful Land Management Practices

Aspen spreads sending up suckers which grow off the roots of mature trees which can be found up to 40m from the parent tree. These suckers grow very quickly and can soon develop a dense thicket. The largest living organism on earth is an aspen clone in Utah, United States called "Pando" which is latin for "I spread". It extends across 106 acres and is connected by a single root system. It is thought to weigh about 6000 tonnes! Aspen roots can stay alive underground for many years following the death of the parent tree leading to the sudden appearance of new suckers when there is no evidence of the dead parent tree. These suckers are exact clones of the parent tree being genetically identical. They will flower and come into leaf at the same time and have the same appearance as the parent tree.



Suckers



A patchwork of Different Clones

Aspen is a “keystone” species so is a very important component in the woodland ecosystem. No native British tree species supports more biodiversity. Aspen trees or larger stands provide a habitat for a wide range of rare or nationally important species including flies, moths, beetles, fungi, lichens and mosses. At least 100 species of fungi and 130 species of lichens have been recorded on aspen in Scotland. This includes five UK priority species which depend exclusively upon aspen stands for their habitats including the aspen bract fungus, the aspen hoverfly and the aspen bristle-moss. Aspen is also the favoured food of the European beaver.



European Beaver eating Aspen



Aspen Bristle-Moss

There is much folklore and superstition surrounding the aspen tree. In Wales, it was said that the aspen was used to make the cross of Christ and so the leaves have been shivering in horror ever since. People even used to throw stones at the trees as they were seen as bad luck. In Scotland its quivering leaves were interpreted as gossiping – the tree was known as ‘old wives tongues’. This association with wrong-doing meant that the tree was not commonly planted until modern times.

At the same time aspen also was said to have protective powers. ASPIS, the aspen's Greek name, means shield and light weight aspen wood was also favoured by Celtic warriors. These shields were more than mere physical barriers - they had magical, protective qualities. It was also thought to be good luck to plant a tree close to a house to provide protection.

Ogham inscriptions were used in the Dark Ages as means to write the old gaelic language. This comprised of a sequence of cross-cutting lines similar to runes. At this time, the Tree Alphabet was in use whereby the name of a tree was ascribed to each letter of the alphabet beginning with that letter. The letter E is represented by Eadha which is the old gaelic word for aspen. There are a small number of place names in the Highlands derived from the aspen's modern Gaelic name, critheann, such as Crianlarich.

Aspen wood today is used to make a number of products including oars, matches, and high quality paper.

