

Tamarack

Larix occidentalis

Tamaracks, also known as larch, are one of the most remarkable trees of the pine family. After the leaves of aspen and other deciduous species fade and die in autumn, the tamaracks turn gold—one of the few conifers to do so. (So strange is this transformation to some of us who did not grow up in tamarack country that I actually thought the forest was dying during my first autumn in northwestern Montana.)

These so-called “evergreens” are deciduous conifers, whose needles lose their chlorophyll, revealing yellow xanthophyll pigments, and then drop to the ground. In fall, every tamarack forest byway becomes a yellow brick road down which you can skip in a haze of glowing splendor. Even on cloudy days, the roads and trails seem sun-struck by the tiny needles, which reflect light yet seem illuminated from within.

All winter the tamaracks stand bare and dark, with bear-hair lichens draping their branches like shrouds. When spring arrives the soft, new needles emerge and create a chartreuse lacework in the treetops. For three or four weeks, the tamaracks’ pale green needles distinguish them from the rest of the forest. The needles gradually darken and blend with the other evergreens until October, when once again they light up the woods and trails in a golden glow.

RANGE In Montana, tamaracks grow in the mountains and valleys of the state’s northwestern corner, from the western boundary to the Continental Divide in Glacier National Park and then roughly south into the Bitterroot Range. This is a common tree in most of Canada and Alaska and in other northern states from Oregon to New York.

APPEARANCE Tamaracks are tall, reaching over 150 feet high in Montana, with trunks straight as ship masts. (The world record western tamarack, near Seeley Lake, is 153 feet tall and 264 inches around the base.) The craggy bark on older trees is fire resistant. The outside ash gray color hides a rusty orange bark, 4 to 6 inches thick, made of small, irregular scales that can be pried apart easily. The bark of younger trees is buckskin colored. Twigs are light brown and covered with numerous tiny spurs or short branches.

As is the case with most pine family trees, the lower limbs of mature tamaracks die and drop off, leaving an expanse of clear trunk. The crown is a tall pyramid shape. Limbs grow parallel to the ground.

The light green, flat, narrow needles are only 1 to 1½ inches long. They grow in bundles of 14 to 30 from the tips of little rough nubbins on the twigs. These great trees bear small, light brown cones, 1 to 2 inches long, with ¼-inch-long seeds.

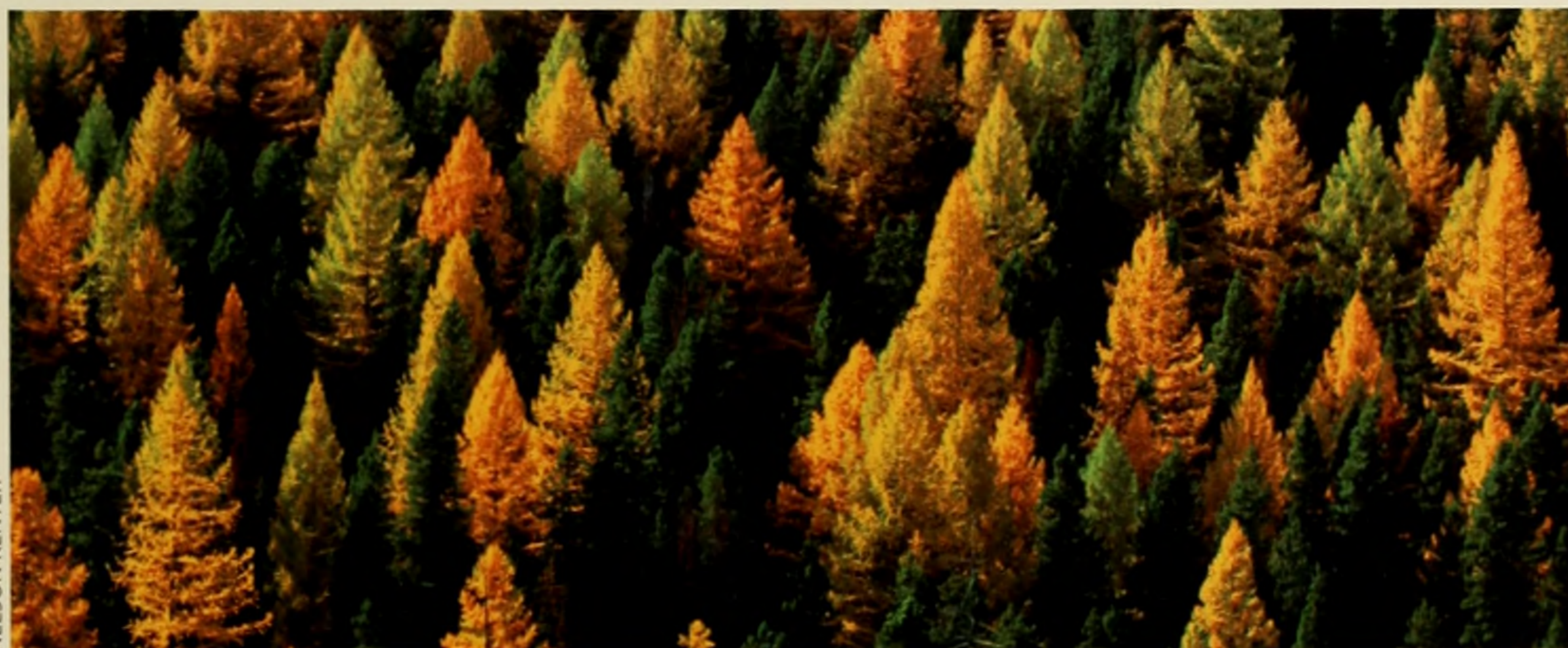
AGE Years ago I felled a tamarack that had died in a fire that raged through the Swan Valley some time in the early 1900s. I counted

350 rings, putting the tree’s origins back to the time of the Jamestown Settlement in Virginia. The fire-scarred behemoths still living in the Swan Valley must now be nearly 450 years old. Ancient tamaracks estimated at more than 900 years old have been reported in some parts of Washington.

ROOTS Unlike the lodgepole pine, fir, and spruce, the tamarack’s roots grow deep. In August 1995, a small tornado swept through a thick regrowth forest near Pierce Lake in the Swan Valley. Across several acres of downed trees, the tamaracks were all that remained standing.

WOOD Tamaracks are highly sought as firewood. The orange-colored wood burns hotter than other conifers, and logs split easily. The tree is also used for lumber, posts, and poles.

HISTORY Because even thick fallen tamarack branches can be broken by hitting them on a stump or fallen tree, early American Indians could carry and stack the firewood without an ax or saw. Indians also made wooden tamarack pots by hollowing out large pitchy burls. They used pitch to help heal cuts and bruises, and chewed it to ease sore throats. To relieve coughs and colds, they drank a tea made from the steeped bark. They made a sweet syrup by hollowing out part of the trunk and allowing moisture from the collected sap to evaporate, thus concentrating the thick liquid. 🐻



BY LORI MICKEN

Lori Micken, a retired high school biology teacher, lives in Livingston.