

Balsam Poplar (Balm of Gilead)

Populus balsamifera

Balsam poplar (often known as Balm of Gilead) is one of several poplar species that are native to Aitkin County. Fast-growing, but short-lived, balsam poplar are often planted as ornamental trees. Balsam poplar leaves are triangular and 3"-6" in length, with finely serrated edges. Balsam poplar is a good wildlife tree; beavers prefer these trees over most other species. Bees will use the resin from their buds to repair their hives. This fragrant resin, called Balm of Gilead, lends this tree its common name. The wood of balsam poplar is brittle and isn't utilized as much as that of the related quaking and bigtooth aspens. Balsam poplar is occasionally used for carving and pulpwood.

Height: 50'-80'

Under favorable conditions, balsam poplar grows more than a foot per year when young. Growth slows as the tree nears maturity.

Planting environment:

Balsam poplar trees are most commonly regenerated through cutting existing trees; this encourages new stems to grow from the existing root system. Balsam poplar trees may also be planted from seed.

Soil composition: Sandy to gravelly, prefers loam & slight acidity

Soil moisture: Well-drained, moist

Sunlight: Very shade intolerant (full sun)

Maintenance:

Balsam poplar requires very little continuous maintenance. Stems that sprout after a timber harvest will self-thin without intervention. Note that root suckers will spread up to 100 feet from a mature balsam poplar tree, and may be removed if undesirable. Balsam poplar have relatively short lifespans of approximately 100 years, and are often replaced by other tree species if the mature trees are not disturbed (disturbances include timber cutting or natural events like windthrow or wildfire). To maintain a balsam poplar presence, consider a clear-cut of mature trees. This will encourage new root suckers to sprout from the poplar's root system.

Top diseases/pests:

1. Ice splits and fracturing
2. Beavers
3. Stem cankers

