

# Western Red Cedar

*Cedar has made possible the rich culture and historic wealth of Salish People by providing for them from birth to death. It has been called Grandmother, Long Life Maker and Rich Woman Maker. Grand longhouses, swift and rot-resistant canoes, durable clothing, watertight baskets, cordage, tools, art, medicine and many other things have been, and continue to be, fashioned from cedar.*

**Other names:** *Thuja plicata*. Whulshootseed: ḵəpayac



**Identifying Cedar:** Cedar is a distinctive tall evergreen tree with a wide buttressing base, and a fibrous, fluted trunk with gray to cinnamon-red bark. Greenish-yellow leaves are flat with opposite scales. Branches are often J-shaped. Simple round flowers bloom in late summer and give the tree a yellowish appearance. They often rain a dust cloud of pollen that makes the air appear hazy and covers everything in fine golden dust. Cedar seed cones have 8-12 scales, are about ½ inch long, and are shaped like rosebuds. They are ingeniously engineered to funnel pollen grains into the small spaces between the scales, like wind turbines. The largest cedar trees are up to 19 feet in diameter and 200 feet tall. Some of the oldest trees are thought to be as much as 1,000 years old.

**Where it Grows:** Cedar thrives in moist soils in lowlands, flats and mountain slopes. It prefers wet, misty forest, and is very common on the west side of the Cascade Mountains from Northern California up into S.E. Alaska. It grows in wetter areas east of the Cascades toward Western Montana and Idaho.

**Season:** Cedar bark is stripped in early spring when the sap is running. Wood can be harvested any time of year. Leaves are harvested any time as well, but they are most aromatic in summer.

**Harvesting and Processing Cedar:** All parts of cedar are highly valued, including the wood, bark, roots, branches and leaves. Harvesting cedar bark takes a lot of expertise. You must understand when, where, and which trees to harvest from, along with how to cut and pull the bark, separate the inner bark from the outer bark, and then dry it. It helps to have an elder or culture keeper take you out and show you several times!

To harvest cedar leaves, carefully prune small fan-like branches here and there so you do not leave a visible impact. Leaves can be used fresh, or they can be dried by bundling several small branches with a rubber band and then hanging them, or placing them on baskets in a dry place with good ventilation. Keep them whole to retain the volatile oils, and then crush them just before you use them. Store in a paper bag or glass jar.

**Traditional uses:** Cedar bark is prized for its durability, flexibility and water resistance. It is peeled from trees with straight trunks by making a single cut and pulling upward on the trunk. Strips can be as long as 27 feet, and are carefully separated into layers. Soft fibers have been used for clothing, mats, napkins and towels. Weavers create beautiful, ornate cedar baskets and hats.

from narrow strands of cedar bark. Outer cedar roots are dug and used in basket making. Branches have also been made into rope, fish traps, binding material and baskets.

Many Native People who do not have cedar trees on reservations gain access through state and federal land partnerships. Protocols for gathering during the correct season, methods for gathering, and ways to honor the tree are still practiced. When walking in the woods, you might notice missing strips of bark that can be new or very old. If done correctly, the tree continues to thrive. Older cedar trees are rare and should be protected resources for Native People since they are so significant to the culture.

Coastal Native Peoples use cedar leaf and bark for a wide array of illnesses. The leaves were a popular internal and external medicine for painful joints. They have also been infused for cough medicine, tuberculosis and fevers. The pitch was used as chewing gum. The leaves make wonderful incense and are used in smudging for purification. Some tribes have used parts of cedar to bring on menstruation and for birth control, but this knowledge is highly protected.

Cedar is currently used for siding on houses, interior finish, greenhouse construction, outdoor furniture, boat building, poles and more. It is rot resistant and long-lasting. If you travel through the Olympic rainforest from Aberdeen north to the Makah Reservation, you will see many old cedar shake (shingle) mills. Very few are still running, since most of the old forests have been logged.

**Cedar Leaf Medicine:** Cedar is a powerful antimicrobial. Reflect on where it lives: cool wet forests where fungi and molds thrive. When you scratch cedar leaves or cut the wood, strong essential oils are released. These oils are cedar's medicine to repel insects, molds, fungi, bacteria and viruses. Our ancestors discovered this long ago and used cedar's medicine in and on themselves to ward off external forces.

Cedar leaf is a useful anti-fungal for skin and nail fungus. The tincture, infused oil or salve can be used topically and should be applied 2-3 times a day until a week after the fungus disappears. Fungal infections are pernicious and need to be treated aggressively. You can also soak your feet in cedar tea by steeping a cup of dried cedar leaves in about 10 cups of hot water. Let the tea steep until it is warm, and then place it in a bowl or basin large enough for your feet. Soak your feet for 10-15 minutes – a nice activity when you are reading or watching television.



Cedar promotes immune function through helping white blood cells to work better. By stimulating our immune cells to fight infection, clean up debris and denature cancer cells, we are keeping our tissues healthy. Doing several cedar steams a day can help to clear respiratory infections. You can also drink cedar tea by steeping a tablespoon of fresh or dried chopped cedar leaf per cup of water. Many herbalists prefer to steep cedar in cold water and let it sit for several hours or overnight. You only need to drink  $\frac{1}{4}$  to  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup twice a day to get a medicinal effect.

**Caution:** Cedar contains strong volatile oils including thujone, a ketone that is known to be toxic in large quantities. Cedar should be used internally with care – the dosage is usually low and it is not used for long periods of time. It should not be used during pregnancy, breastfeeding or with kidney weakness.

**Additional Resources:**

Watch the video *The Teachings of the Tree People: The Work of Bruce Miller*.  
Teachings of the Tree People Curriculum: Curriculum for Engaged Learning through Film  
<https://www.newday.com/sites/default/files/resources/TeachingsCurriculum.pdf>  
Cedar by Hillary Stewart  
People of Cascadia by Heidi Bohan  
Northwest Native American Basket Weavers Association: <http://www.nnaba.net>

**References:**

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Miller, BB. (1998) *Sayuyay a ti tuwaduc, Herbal Medicine of the Twana*. 1998.  
Moore, M. (1993). *Medicinal Plants of the Pacific West*.  
Pojar, Jim and Mackinnon, Andy. (1994) *Plants of the Pacific NW Coast*. Lone Pine.  
Preston, Richard J. (1980) *North American Trees*. Iowa State University Press.  
Stewart, Hillary. (1995) *Cedar: Tree of Life to the Northwest Coastal Indians*.

# Grandmother Cedar Tree

A Samish Story as told by Roger Fernandes, Lower Elwha S'Klallam Storyteller.

*A long time ago there was a Grandma Cedar Tree. She was very big and very old.*

*One day a little tree began to grow next to her. It was her grandson. He was growing right next to her and she was very happy.*

*The little tree grew and grew.*

*One day a big windstorm came and the wind blew very hard. The wind was blowing on the little tree and he could not stand up to it. It was going to snap him and he would die. But Grandma Cedar Tree placed her arms, her branches, between him and the wind. She blocked the wind and protected her little grandson.*

*And he grew some more.*

*One summer day, the sun was very hot. It beat down upon the little tree and it was so hot it hurt him. He was drying out. But Grandma Cedar Tree put her branches over him and made shade. She protected him from the hot sun.*

*He grew some more.*

*One night deer came to the little tree. The deer liked to eat the fresh green branches of a growing little tree. But Grandma waved her arms at them and chased them away! She protected him from the deer.*

*He grew even more.*

*Sometimes the little tree was sad because there were no other little trees around to visit with. He was sometimes very lonely. Grandma used her spirit power to call the birds to the little tree. The birds flew around him and sat in his branches and sang and talked with him. So he did not feel so lonely.*

*So he grew and he grew. And now he was bigger than his grandma. He was a big cedar tree and he was taller than her.*

*Grandma was getting very old. She was very old now.*

*One day a windstorm came and began to push old Grandma Cedar Tree with its great wind power. She was too old to fight back and the wind was so strong it was going to break her and she would die. But Grandson Cedar Tree put his arm branches between her and the wind. He protected her from the strong wind.*

*One day during the summer, the hot sun beat down upon old Grandma. She was miserable in the heat and was too old to stand it any more. Her grandson put his arms over her and made shade, protecting her from the hot sun.*

*One night the deer came. They wanted to nibble the green branches of the old tree. But her grandson waved his arms at them and chased them away. He protected her from the deer.*

*Grandma was very old and all her old friends were gone. They had died many years before and she felt alone. Grandson used his power to call the birds to Grandma. They flew to her and landed in her branches and sang and talked to her. She did not feel so lonely.*

*She said, "Grandson, don't worry about me. I am old now. Take care of yourself. Do not worry about me any more."*

*But he said, "Grandma, when I was little you protected me. When the strong wind blew upon me, you blocked the wind with your arms. When it was so hot in the summertime, you made shade with your arms and protected me. When the deer came at night to eat my branches, you chased them away with your arms. And when I was lonely, you called the birds to me so I would not be alone. Grandma, you did all these things for me, and now I will do them for you."*

*And so Grandson Cedar Tree took care of his beloved Grandmother Cedar Tree.*

*And that is all.*



# The Girl Who Was I-I-Esh

A Yakima Story as told by Roger Fernandes



A long time ago...

*On the other side of the mountains there lived a little girl.*

*Now this little girl didn't always listen or pay attention when the grown-ups were talking to her so she would always mess something up or lose something or break something. And the grown-ups would say to her, "Ooooh, you are so i-i-es! You don't listen!"*

*And that little girl thought, "Maybe I am i-i-es. Maybe I can't learn anything."*

*When she would play with the other children in the village, she didn't always listen or pay attention to what they were saying so she would make her team lose or mess up the game. And the other children would say, "You are so i-i-es! You don't know anything!"*

*So after a while that little girl believed she was i-i-es. She believed she couldn't learn anything. And because of this she would sit by herself watching the other children play. She wished she could play with them, but she knew they would laugh at her and call her i-i-es. So she was always alone.*

*One day she was so sad and lonely, she left the village. She followed the trails and walked into the woods. She followed the trails a long ways and finally she sat down by a tree and she started to cry. She cried and cried and she woke up the tree. It was an old grandma cedar tree. Grandma Cedar Tree said, "Little girl, what are you crying for? You woke me up."*

*"Oh, I'm i-i-es," said the little girl. "I can't learn anything."*

*The tree said, "Oh, little girl! I can teach you something if you want to learn."*

*The little girl said, "Yes! I want to learn! What can you teach me?"*

*The tree said, "I want you to very carefully dig up some of my roots and take off some of my bark. Then I want you to tear them into strips. Can you do that?"*

*"Yes!" said the little girl. And she dug up some roots, took off some bark and tore them into strips. She stood there holding the strips of bark and roots in her hand. "What do I do with them now?" she asked.*

*"Come sit by me and I will show you," said Grandma Cedar Tree. So the little girl sat by the tree and Grandma reached her branches down like hands and guided the little girl until she made...a little basket.*

*Now it was a crooked little basket and it had big holes all over it and there were several strands of bark and root hanging from it, but the little girl asked, "Did I make a good basket?"*

*The tree said, "The only way you will know is to take your basket down to the river and put it in and lift it out. If it holds water, you have made a good basket."*

*The little girl cried, "Do I have to? I don't want to go to the river! Can't you just look...."*

*"Little girl, this is how you will know you have made a good basket! Take it to the river and see if it holds water," said Grandma Cedar Tree.*

The little girl sighed loudly and went down to the river. She dipped the basket into the water and all the water leaked out of the big holes. She carried the basket back up the hill to Grandma Cedar Tree. "All the water poured out. What do I do now?" she asked.

Grandma Cedar Tree said, "You must take it apart and weave it again."

"Do I have to?" cried the little girl in protest.

"Little girl, this is how you learn," said Grandma Cedar Tree.

The little girl groaned and she took the basket apart and wove it again. This time it didn't look so lopsided and this time there were hardly any holes in it at all. Only a few small ones. "Did I make a good basket this time?" the little girl asked.

Grandma said, "The only way you will know is to take it down to the river. Dip it into the water, lift it out, and see if it holds water. Then you will know."

The little girl cried, "Do I have to? Just look at it and tell me!"

"Little girl, this is how you learn. Take your basket to the river and see if it holds water," Grandma Cedar Tree explained.

"Oh, all right," snapped the little girl. She took her basket back down the hill to the river and dipped it in. She lifted it out and saw that it was holding water, but the water was leaking slowly out of those little holes. She rushed back to the cedar tree, but by the time she got there, all the water was gone.

"Well, it was holding water," she said, "but all the water leaked out. What do I do now?"

"What you must do, is take it apart and weave it again," Grandma Cedar Tree explained.

The little girl cried, "My fingers are sore from weaving baskets all day! Can't you just look at it...."

Grandma Cedar Tree said, "This is how you learn, little girl. Take it apart and weave it again."

The little girl shrugged her shoulders, but she took the basket apart and wove it again. This time it didn't look crooked at all and when she held it to the light, she didn't see any holes. "Did I make a good basket now?" she asked.

Grandma Cedar Tree said, "The only way you will know is if you take it down to the river and see if it holds water."

Then the little girl cried, "Do I have to? I am getting tired going up and down the hill all day."

Cedar Tree said, "This is how you learn. Take it to the river and see if it holds water."

The Little Girl groaned, "Awwwww." Then took the basket down to the river. She dipped it in the river and this time, it held water. She ran back to the cedar tree, carrying the basket of water.

"Look. Look!" she said. "It's holding water!"

Grandma Cedar Tree said, "You did it little girl. It is a wonderful basket. It is a perfect basket. You did a very good job."

The little girl was so happy. She poured water around the roots of Grandma Cedar Tree as a way of saying thank you. She was so proud of her basket, she made it herself and it held water.

*Then she noticed something. Her basket had no designs on it; there were no designs at all. It was naked. The little girl began to cry again. Grandma Cedar Tree said, "What are you crying for now little girl?"*

*The little girl said, "My basket needs designs, but I don't know any designs. I am i-i-esh. I do not know anything."*

*Grandma Cedar Tree said, "It is very simple little girl. All you have to do is go up into the mountains with your basket. Walk around and keep your eyes open. If you keep your eyes open the design will give itself to you."*

*The Little Girl cried, "Do I have to? I don't want to go up in the mountains, that is too far to go!"*

*Grandma Cedar Tree said, "This is how you'll find your design little girl. Take your basket up into the mountains."*

*The little girl took her basket up into the mountains. She carried her basket, keeping her eyes open, or so she thought. But she couldn't see any design and she thought, "No design will give itself to me because I am i-i-esh." Because of this she began to cry again.*

*She cried so loud she woke up the Mountain. The Mountain said, "Little girl, what are you crying so loud for? You woke me up."*

*The Little Girl said, "I am looking for designs for my basket, like Cedar Tree said, but I can't find any because I am i-i-esh."*

*The Mountain said, "Little girl, look at me. Can you see that I am a design?"*

*The Little Girl said, "Yes, you look like a big triangle."*

*The Mountain said, "You can use that as a design for the bottom of your basket."*

*So the little girl wove what we call the mountain design, a triangle with steps going up the side. She thanked the mountain and kept walking around because she needed one more design for the rim of the basket. She walked around but she couldn't find another design. "I am so i-i-esh! I will never find another design!" said the Little Girl and she began to cry again.*

*She cried so loud she woke up a rattlesnake. Rattlesnake slithered from under the rocks and said, "Little Girl, why are you crying so loud? You woke me up."*

*The Little Girl said, "I need another design for my basket. Mountain gave me one, but I can't find another design because I am i-i-esh. I don't know anything."*

*The Rattlesnake said, "Little Girl, look at me, can you see a design on my back?"*

*The Little Girl said, "Yes it looks like diamonds hooked together." The Rattlesnake said, "Little girl you can use that for your basket."*

*And so she wove what we call the Rattlesnake design, diamonds linked together, around the rim of her basket. The Little Girl thanked the Rattlesnake and went back down the mountain. She went by the Cedar Tree, crossed the river and walked into her village. The people saw her coming, carrying something. They went up to her and said, "Little Girl, what is that?"*

*She said, "A basket." When they asked where she got it, she said, "I made it."*

*They said, "Where did you learn how to make a basket?"*

*She said, "Cedar tree showed me how to make it out of bark and roots. It holds water too."*

*The people said, "What are those designs on the basket Little Girl?"*

*She said, "This is the Mountain and this is the Rattlesnake."*

*Skeptically, they asked, "Where did you get those designs?"*

*She said, "Mountain and Rattlesnake gave them to me."*

*They said, "Little Girl, will you teach us how to make a basket like that?"*

*She said, "Yes I can."*

*They said, "Little girl can you teach us how to put designs on the basket like that?"*

*She said, "Yes I can."*

*And so the Little Girl taught her people how to make what is called the cedar coiled basket, made out of cedar bark and roots and so tightly woven it can hold water. And do you think the people called her i-i-esch anymore? That is all.*

## Making Cedar Oil

*This deep-green aromatic oil smells just like the forest on a warm day. You can use it as a body oil, lamp oil, furniture polish and a topical healing remedy in healing salves and chest rubs.*



1. Finely chop fresh cedar leaves and place them in a double boiler. If you do not have a double boiler you can create your own by adding a little water to a larger pot and then placing a smaller pot inside it.

This helps to warm the oil gently so it does not overheat.

2. Place the cedar leaf in the smaller pot and just cover with extra virgin olive oil. You can use other rendered oils including coconut, grape seed, jojoba or even lard if you prefer.

3. Gently heat the oil so that it gets warm but does not boil. I turn the pot on and off several times throughout the day. Warm the oil like this for several days to a week so that the oil becomes dark green and smells strongly of cedar.

4. Strain the cedar oil with muslin cloth. Compost the pressed leaf and place the oil in a glass jar.

5. Label and store in a cool dark place. Cedar oil will usually last several years.

## Cedar Facial Steam

You can use dried herbs or essential oil and will need a medium sized bowl and a towel. Place one handful of herbs like cedar leaf, fir needle, pine needle, eucalyptus leaf, rosemary, peppermint or lavender in the bowl. Cedar is a good medicine for coughs and colds because it helps to fight infection, increases circulation in the lungs and stimulates your immune system. Add **one to two** drops of essential oil if desired. Pour boiled water over the herbs until the bowl is about half full. Put your face over the steaming herbs at a comfortable distance and cover your head with a towel. Breath deep! Try to steam for at least 5 minutes. Pour more hot water in if necessary. For severe coughs or sinus congestion, do several steams a day.



## Cedar Bentwood Box

*From Abe Lloyd*

With sides folded from a single slab of cedar, bentwood boxes are easily crafted into watertight canteens, cooking vessels and storage boxes. These containers are not found anywhere else in the world and are traditionally constructed from cedar planks that are split from standing trees or fallen logs with yew wood wedges. The plank is planed smooth, notched through most of the board's thickness where the corners will be, and steamed until the remaining wood is soft and supple. The sides are then bent around a solid base, and the joints (where the ends of the board come together) are fastened with pegs or sewn with spruce roots.

Cooking boxes and canteens were so tightly constructed that they hold water, and any leaks that form over time can be sealed with clay. Together with fire tongs and cooking rocks, a quick meal can be boiled or steamed inside a piece of wood! Many Salish people boiled food in baskets in the same manner as bentwood boxes.



Pete Peterson Sr. (Skokomish) and Alex McCarty (Makah) making cedar boxes at the Evergreen State College. Cooking in a bentwood box with Abe Lloyd and Northwest Indian Treatment Center patients.

## Western Red Cedar

*I am the heat of your hearth on the cold winter nights, the friendly shade screening you  
from summer sun, and the dancing bows that capture your imagination.*

*I am the beam that holds your house, the board of your table, and the roof that shelters  
you from rain.*

*I am the handle of your shovel, the bark of your basket, and the hull of your canoe.*

*I am the medicine that heals you, the incense that carries your prayers, and tea that is  
used to cleanse your home.*

*I am the wood of your cradle and the shell of your coffin.*

*I am the breath of kindness and the flower of beauty.*

*"Ye who pass by me, listen to my prayer: Harm me not."*

"Prayer of the Woods," a Portuguese forest preservation prayer that has been used for more than 1,000 years.  
Author unknown, adapted by Elise Krohn