



By Brendan McShane

TREEmendous!

Leaves and Needles

Although you may find tree leaves and needles littered all over the ground, that doesn't mean they're useless! Jacques Cartier, the French explorer, became stranded along the St. Lawrence River in the winter of 1535. Many of his crew developed scurvy, a dangerous disease caused by not eating fresh fruit and vegetables, which contain vitamin C. The Stadaconans, an Iroquoian-speaking people of the region saved Cartier and many of his crew by brewing a tea from the leaves of a tree they called *anneda* — likely the eastern white cedar. A grateful Cartier said the drink came from the “tree of life.”

On the East Coast, spruce beer has a long history among the English, French and Acadians. They combined shoots from a spruce tree with sugar, water and yeast — some also added dandelions and grain — and left it to ferment

into an alcoholic drink.

Pressed, dried leaves can be found in herbariums

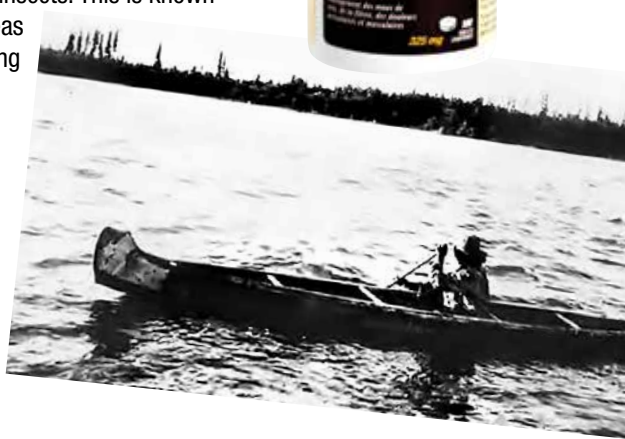
— collections of preserved plants useful to scientists like Kate Crooks. A member of the Botanical Society of Canada, she displayed her collection of Ontario plants at the International Exhibition of 1862 in London, England.

One leaf in particular is the most important to Canadian history: the maple leaf! At first, it was a symbol of French Canadians, appearing in songs, newspapers and on medals in the 1800s. It quickly became a symbol of Canada as a whole. In the 1960s, Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson started a search for a distinctly Canadian flag for Canada's 100th anniversary in 1967. Canadians of all ages sent in their designs. George Stanley's design of a single red maple leaf won out.



BARK

First Nations people have used tree bark for as long as anyone can remember. Birch bark's flexibility and strength made it great for creating baskets to store food and bowls for cooking. European voyageurs learned to paddle the light birch bark canoes long used by First Nations to travel the waterways of Canada. Birch bark can even be rolled up into a cone to make moose calls! First Nations from many regions of Canada have made an art form of piercing birch bark with their teeth to create patterns and images of people, flowers and insects. This is known as birch bark biting. Indigenous people in many areas have used willow bark for thousands of years, boiling a tea to relieve pain, swelling and fevers. Although your doctor is unlikely to give you willow bark, you may have heard of its modern name: aspirin.



SAP AND RESIN

What could be more Canadian than maple syrup? Although there are many different stories about how First Nations discovered maple syrup, it has played an important role in Canada's story for many generations. In Ontario, Quebec and the Maritimes, people still boil down maple sap from their sugar bushes (stands of sugar maple trees) in the early spring to create syrup. Although maple syrup gets all the attention, there are other kinds of tree saps that can be turned into a sweet treat. Birch sap, for example, makes a rich, dark syrup with a caramel flavour.

Think of tree resin as a much thicker, stickier sap. It's been used to make paints and varnishes, and to waterproof ships. Resin from a pine tree makes a good fire-starter. Settlers picked up the habit from First Nations people of chewing strong spruce and pine resin just like you might chew gum. Tree resin is called "rosin" when it's used for musical purposes. For centuries, people who play stringed instruments like the violin or cello have rubbed rosin on their bows to create a clearer sound. And since the late 1800s, baseball pitchers have kept a small bag of powdered rosin on the mound to help them get a good grip on the ball.



TRUNKS

One of the most beautiful and awe-inspiring uses for tree trunks is in totem poles of First Nations in territories on the West Coast. The carvings vary depending on which nation the carver is from. In parts of British Columbia you can also see something called culturally modified trees. First Nations people have altered these trees for traditional uses, sometimes leaving them standing.

Tree trunks have been essential for constructing all kinds of homes, barns and other buildings throughout Canadian history. Early settlers in eastern Canada cut down trees to clear land for farms, and used the logs to build their first houses, fitting squared or round logs together. Some First Nations used long wooden poles to create wigwams, tipis and other kinds of shelters.

Tree trunks were even used to grind corn. First Nations people hollowed out a section of a tree trunk so that corn kernels could be dropped inside. With a large wooden pounder, these kernels could be ground up for use in baking.

England had cut down many of its forests by the 1600s. So when it needed long, straight tree trunks to make masts for its Royal Navy ships, it looked to North America. Trunks from the plentiful eastern white pine, which can grow more than 40 metres tall, were perfect for mast-building. Huge swaths of forest were cut down and shipped to England until the early 1900s.

Tree trunks were first cut by hand, and later run through water- or horse-powered sawmills to create boards. Those were then used to build everything from furniture to wagons.





ROOTS

If you know how to use tree roots, they're buried treasure! The Tlingit and Coast Salish peoples have gathered and used the roots of cedar and spruce trees for countless generations. These roots can be woven into baskets, bowls and mats. Women usually did the weaving over the long winter months. It was difficult work. They had to soak each root until it was flexible and could be split into smaller strands.



DISPOSABLE SHIPS

How would you save money on deliveries of wood carried on a ship? By making the ship itself part of the deal! During the early 1800s, some smart merchants took apart ships delivering wood to England and sold their wooden parts. (Bonus: they didn't have to pay tax on the ships' wood.) These "disposable ships" allowed Canadian timber merchants to make more money on every trip across the Atlantic — though they would have to find another ship to take their crews home! One of the most famous was the *Baron of Renfrew*, an enormous disposable ship built in 1825, then sailed to England where it was deconstructed.

Axe handles, clothespins, chairs, dolls, storage chests, bowls, fences, church pews, bed frames, barrels ... not to mention paper bags, school books, newspapers ... wood was everywhere in bygone centuries, as this photo from the kitchen at Lang Pioneer Village in Ontario shows.

