

Larch (*Larix decidua*)



General Info

Larch is the only deciduous conifer native to central Europe. The European larch was introduced to the UK in the 17th century and widely planted as a timber tree and for ornamental purposes because of its attractive autumn foliage. This introduced species has been here a long time and seems very at home in Scottish forests.

At TreeZone there are around half a dozen trees scattered throughout the area and several of these make up part of the course.



Box of Knowledge

The first UK larches were planted at Dunkeld Cathedral in 1738 by the second Duke of Atholl. One of these ancient trees is still standing.

Vital

statistics

Mature trees can grow to between 30 and 40m and can live for 250 years.





Ecosystem

The seeds are eaten by red squirrels and a number of birds including the crossbill and chaffinch. The shrub layer in larch forests provides not only food but also cover for the woodland birds. Black Grouse are also known to eat the buds and immature cones. The caterpillars of many moths feed on the foliage, including the case-bearer moth and larch pug. Larch tortrix moth caterpillars eat the cone scales.

Larches feathery foliage and more open canopy make conditions much lighter on the woodland floor than other conifer forests. This provides ideal conditions for plants, grasses and important wildlife shrubs like brambles. The shrub layer within the forest also supports some species of woodland butterfly. Larch forests are warm and moist and often abundant in fungi. Some fungi are only found in association with larch such as the larch bolete and the rarer larch knight.

Box of Knowledge:

In European folklore larch was said to protect against enchantment. The wearing and burning of larch was thought to protect against evil spirits.

Leaves, seeds, bark and flowers

The bark is pinky brown in colour, thick and develops wide vertical fissures with age. Twigs are amber or slightly pink, and hairless. The light green leaves are soft and needle-like, 2-4cm long, which grow in tufts from short woody knobs, or shoots, on the twigs. They turn golden yellow before falling in autumn.

European larch is monoecious, meaning both male and female flowers are found on the same tree. Male flowers form on the underside of shoots, and are globular clusters of creamy yellow anthers. Female flowers are often referred to as 'larch roses'. Comprising flower-like clusters of scales in pink, green or white, they grow at the tips of shoots. After pollination by wind, the female flowers ripen into brown cones 3-4cm long with a hollow top. They gradually open their scales to release the winged seeds within. Seeds are distributed by wind. Larch trees can retain old cones on their stems for many years.





References

Woodland Trust (no date) *Larch*. Available at:

<http://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/learn/british-trees/non-native-trees/larch/> (Accessed 13 April 2014).

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