

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

Black Poplar



Black Poplar (*Populus nigra*) is a broadleaf deciduous tree native to the UK and Europe, and according to the Forestry Commission it is the most endangered native timber tree in Britain.

What does Black Poplar look like? -

Mature trees grow to 30 metres and can live for 200 years. The bark is dark brown but often appears black and is thick with numerous fissures and burrs. Twigs are lumpy and brown in colour, and the leaves are shiny, green and heart-shaped, with long tips and a mild scent of balsam. Young leaves are covered in fine, tiny hairs, which they shed by autumn.

Black Poplar is *dioecious*, so has male and female varieties with different flowers (catkins). The male catkins are red and female catkins are yellow green which are pollinated by wind. Once fertilised, female catkins develop into fluffy cotton-like seeds, which fall in late summer and have a faint scent of balsam. The triangular leaves

distinguish it from the White Poplar (*Populus alba*) which has rounded leaves. It is identified in winter by poplar twigs, the older ones being very knobbly. Buds spiral round and are closely pressed to the twig.

Where to find Black Poplar - As a declining species, Black Poplar is rarely found and grows in isolation but is most prevalent in Shropshire, Cheshire, Somerset and East Anglia. It grows best in boggy conditions, alongside ditches and on floodplains.

Value to wildlife - Black Poplar is the foodplant for the caterpillars of many moths, including the hornet, wood leopard, poplar hawk and figure of eighty. The catkins provide an early source of pollen and nectar for bees and other insects, and the seeds are eaten by birds.

Mythology and symbolism - According to Greek mythology, the Black Poplar was created after Phaeton's fatal attempt to drive Apollo's chariot. Phaeton's sisters made such a fuss mourning his death that the gods changed them into Black Poplar. It is also said that fallen red male catkins are Devil's fingers and bring bad luck if picked up!

How we use Black Poplar - The wood is fine textured, soft and almost white in colour. Being resistant to shock, traditional uses included carts, floorboards

and clogs. It was also used to make matches. Today, Black Poplar timber is used to make artificial limbs, wine cases, pallets, shelving and toys.

Threats - Because there are so few wild Black Poplars left, it is unlikely they will pollinate each other. Instead, the large numbers of cultivated trees pollinate them resulting in no regeneration of true wild Black Poplar. In addition, poplar species are prone to a variety of fungal diseases including cankers, leaf rusts and poplar scab.