

## ASPEN *Populus tremula*

LATIN EXPLANATION. *pop-u-lus*; The tree of the people. *trem-ul-a*; Trembling, the quivering of the leaves.

**HEIGHT** - Aspen can reach a height of 20m (66ft) on reasonably fertile soil and occasionally more.

**SOIL TYPE** - It is found growing in open woodlands on poor soil, particularly where they are permanently moist, but also occurs on scrubby heathland where it may remain a bush. It is not normally found on soils with a high lime content, preferring neutral to acid, but not soils that are too dry.

**HABITAT** - Aspen does not thrive in woodland with a dense canopy as it is very intolerant of shade. This is perhaps the reason for its apparent preference for poor soils - it will grow only where taller trees cannot overtop it. It grows rapidly but is not long-lived, although it produces abundant suckers. These can form dense thickets which make good bird cover. Aspen is very tolerant of exposure and will do well in cold, windy sites. Often found in copses on a moist, light soil.



**SHAPE** - A deciduous, suckering tree. The light-grey, smooth bark becomes darker and more rugged with age. The rounded leaves are borne on long flattened stalks that catch even the slightest breeze causing the familiar trembling movement. The leaves, which show rich autumn colour, fall in October.

**ASSOCIATED SPECIES** - Alder (*Alnus glutinosa*), ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*), grey willow (*Salix cinerea*), guelder rose (*Viburnum opulus*), hazel (*Corylus avellana*), pedunculate oak (*Quercus robur*).

**DISTRIBUTION** - Aspen is found wild through most of Europe. It is common in the north and west of Scotland and across Ireland, where it will grow at altitudes of up to 500m, though it rarely reaches a height of more than 10m in such areas.

**FLOWERS & SEEDS** - Aspen trees are dioecious (male and female flowers appear on different trees). The catkins, clusters of smaller flowers, appear well before the leaves in March and April. The female flowers mature into a package of seeds and "cotton". They ripen in early summer, the cotton acting like a small parachute to help distribution by the wind.

### INTERESTING FACTS

- Aspen apparently sets seed only rarely in these islands, but reproduces vegetatively and with great vigour by means of suckers, often resulting in the growth of a small wood around a single parent tree.
- Aspen wood is very light and has been used for veneer and plywood, for matches and light boxes for fruit and vegetables. It is widely used for pulp and paper in North America.
- A number of fungi are found specifically under aspen, including the large edible Boletid (*Krombholziella aurantiaca*).
- A number of insects are known to be associated specifically with aspen including the rare, light orange underwing moth (*Archiearis notha*). Two gall-midges are restricted to aspen - *Harmandia globuli*, whose bright red, thimble-shaped gall can be seen on the upper side of the leaves in June and July, and *Syndiplosis petioli*.
- Growing from cuttings (vegetative propagation) ensures that the new trees are the same strain and sex as the parent tree.
- After fifty or sixty years, its heartwood begins to decay. Destruction is further hastened by attacks of such internal-feeding insects as the caterpillars of the goat moth (*Cossus ligniperda*).
- It is not deep-rooted. Many roots run almost horizontal.
- Where accessible to cattle and deer, the foliage of the suckers is eagerly browsed by them.

Aspen leaves.



Moss and lichen on the bark of aspen.

