

Cottonwood — Ciquq

CIQUMEK ATURTAARTUT PAAL'KAALIYAKAMENG. – THEY USE COTTONWOOD WHEN THEY MAKE SMOKED SALMON.

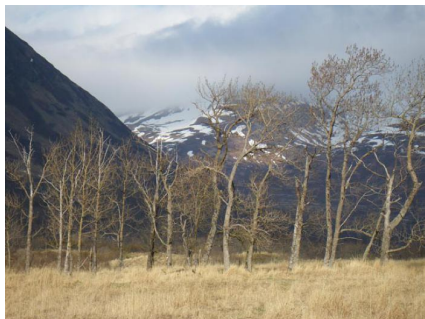


Photo: Stand of cottonwood trees on the shore of Karluk Lake.

The black cottonwood, or balsam poplar (*Populus balsamifera*), is a common deciduous tree in coastal Alaska. It thrives at lower elevations in moist soil and typically occurs in large stands on floodplains, riverbanks, and disturbed ground. Kodiak is home to two very similar varieties of this tree. Cottonwoods have oval leaves; thick, deeply furrowed gray bark; and a soft wood. The term cottonwood refers to the many small cottony seeds released by the trees' flowers each summer. These fluffy seeds float through the air like snow.

Cottonwood has many uses. Alutiiq people favor cottonwood for smoking fish because it burns slowly and at low temperatures. People prefer to use dead wood and bark for this task because green cottonwood imparts a stronger, less desirable flavor. Cottonwood is not typically used to heat homes, although shavings of the wood make excellent tinder.

The Alutiiq word for cottonwood, *ciquq*, can also be used to mean “dish” in the Chugach Alutiiq dialect, because the soft wood of this tree was once carved into kitchen utensils. Before carving, craftsmen sometimes burned their stock with hot rocks to aid in shaping the wood. In addition to plates, ladles, and spoons, people carved cottonwood into fishing floats and toys. Planks of green cottonwood are valuable for construction because they resist water better than spruce, and cottonwood poles make good supports for fish-drying racks.

Cottonwood also has healing properties. Alutiiq steam bathers use their leafy branches to switch away aches and pains, particularly those associated with arthritis. Arthritis can also be eased by soaking your feet in hot water infused with cottonwood branches.