

# All about Larches

by Tony

Larch (*larix*) is one of the few deciduous conifers found in the Northern hemisphere. There are three varieties used extensively for bonsai, although others may be adapted as well. They are Japanese Larch (*larix kaempferi*), European Larch (*larix decidua*) (both have limited availability through nurseries here in Toronto) and Tamarack (*larix laricina*). The Tamarack is difficult to find in local nurseries but is readily available for collecting throughout northern and southern Ontario.

All make excellent bonsai. Branches are flexible and easily wired, holding their shape after as little as one growing season. Trunks and surface roots thicken with age and develop a rough, 'flaky' texture. Cones appear occasionally on trained specimens and are small enough to be in scale for bonsai. The most interesting feature is the foliage. It starts in spring as bright, almost lime green then changes to a darker blue-green during the summer, leaving its most brilliant yellow colour for the fall. A well-ramified specimen can look its best in the winter when its branches highlight the intricate overall structure.

As most Larch are collected from the wild, the following discussion is directed to these trees but can be modified for nursery stock.

## Collecting:



Larch collected 1982

As mentioned above, the best way to obtain a Tamarack is by collecting from the wild. This is best done in the fall when the foliage has turned yellow, but may be done even earlier. In southern Ontario this is usually in October or November, depending on weather conditions.

Trees should be collected from open areas, as understory trees tend to be 'leggy' with few low branches. Areas such as ditches, Hydro rights-of-way and railway corridors are ideal. Remember to get landowner's permission before digging and tidy up after.

Ideal specimens would have many low branches, mature bark on the trunk and a spreading root system. Of course the ideal is always hard to find so compromise will be necessary. In most cases a larger tree should be collected and then the size reduced during initial pruning.

When collecting, try to get as much soil as possible. This will ensure adequate roots to help the tree through its first year. Use a sharp shovel or pruners to cut cleanly through the roots and tie burlap or plastic around the root ball to keep it intact. If it is small enough, a bucket or pail can be used. If it will be more than three hours before the tree will be transplanted, be sure to keep the roots moist.

As soon as possible after collecting the tree must be transplanted - either into an oversized pot or into the garden. In each case it is best to remove most of the soil and the 'extraneous' roots that inevitably are found in the soil. This will allow you to examine the root structure and decide on surface roots. Do not remove any of the tree's roots at this time but try to imagine future root pruning that will be needed to fit the tree into a bonsai pot. Any heavy or dead branches that will obviously not be part of the future design can be removed at this time.

If planting into a pot, use good bonsai soil and wire the tree firmly into the pot to prevent wind damage. Place in a shady area and keep the soil evenly moist - do not overwater. If there is still foliage on the tree it should be misted occasionally to prevent overdrying. When the tree has gone completely dormant, move it to winter storage.

If planting in the garden, try to give it temporary shade such as a burlap windbreak. Depending on the size of the tree and the size of the root ball, a stake may be needed to help support the tree until the roots develop. Since it is already in the ground it will not be necessary to give any extra winter protection. However, wrapping with burlap for the first winter would not hurt. Ideally the tree should be allowed to grow relatively undisturbed for one year before the final design pruning is done.

## Initial Pruning:

As mentioned above, during the first year there should be no pruning done on a collected Larch. This allows the tree to re-establish healthy, vigorous growth, and give you ample time to decide on the proper design. The tree can be given its primary pruning in the spring of the second year, before the buds break - that is, when they start to swell and turn a gold colour, or when the green is first visible.

Larch can be designed in any style except broom. Follow the design principles for your chosen style. Once you have the basic branch pattern established, reduce the branch length by cutting the branch just past a bud that is facing in the direction that you want future growth. Remember that this is not an attempt to increase ramification, but rather you are trying to set the final structure and shape of the tree, so this should be near to the final length of each branch.

Wire each major branch and all secondary branches loosely and bend the branches into position. Be careful as it is easy to damage the delicate buds. Be sure to wire between buds. The tree will look very sparse and 'open' at this time, but it will fill in over the years. Young Larch grow very quickly, so keep an eye on the wire. It will cut into the bark before you know it.

After this major pruning, keep the tree in a shady location and water only as needed for one week. Gradually bring it out to a full sun location over the next week.



**Initial pruning 1984**

## Care:

Larch can grow in many environments from dry to wet. Plant in good loose bonsai soil with good drainage. During the summer keep the tree in full sun and water daily. Do not start fertilizing until after the leaf buds have opened. Fertilize once per week with a high nitrogen (30-10-10) water soluble fertilizer during the summer (until late August) then with a balanced fertilizer (20-20-20) until the needles start to turn yellow. dormant and requires no fertilizer.

Larch grow abundant new branches from leaf bud locations in the spring, with less vigorous growth throughout the year. These new branches should be allowed to grow to two or three inches in length and then pinched back to about one inch. In the fall, after the needles have fallen, you will see next year's buds on these new branches. To encourage finer ramification, each small branch should be cut back to two or three buds. All terminal buds at the end of branches should be removed. This will help keep the needles smaller.



**Cut to two buds**



**Pruned to two buds**



**Branch ramification**

If needed, any wiring should be done as described above in early spring before repotting and removed in the fall, after needle drop. Because of the rapid growth of young Larch, they can be repotted every one to two years. This should be done in early spring immediately after wiring. Roots can be pruned heavily but no more than one quarter should be removed each year. Remove the roots from the outside of the root ball and if necessary cut out one or two small pie-shaped wedges to allow room for new soil and new fine feeder roots.

**Winter:**

Larch are very hardy so they can be stored with any other outdoor bonsai, either in a cold frame or with their roots buried in the soil in a protected area. The location should receive no direct sun while being open to the sky. It should also be protected from drying winds and continuous freeze/thaw cycles. As with all other outdoor bonsai, ensure that the roots do not dry out by occasionally spreading snow over the storage area.

**Conclusion:**

In our northern climate there is no finer species for bonsai training than the native Tamarack. With the proper care it is easy to work with and beautiful to view. It will continue to develop and increase in beauty over the years as the branches become more ramified and the bark matures.



**Tamarack (larch)**



**Tamarack forest**