Red Alder

Alnus rubra

"Red alder seeds attract many bird and small mammal species… Most of the seeds remain on the tree well into the fall and winter months, providing valuable resources for seed-eating birds, insects and mammals when other foods are scarce."

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This stand of red alder began growing fairly recently, possibly after larger trees were cut and sold to pay for building our Ramada. In time, the trees that grow most vigorously will crowd out or shade their smaller competitors, which will die off and, by decomposing, enrich the soil for the victors. In 50 or 60 years the mature alder will begin die and this stand yield to Douglas Fir and other conifers able to grow in the rich soil created by decaying trees and the shade cast by the remaining alder.

A tree generally found only in the coastal northwest, red alder is a gift to the plants of the forest. Its roots host a bacteria which produces nitrogen from the air and sequesters it into the soil where it is used by neighboring plants. The leaves of the tree are rich in nitrogen and when they fall and decompose on the forest floor, they add more nitrogen to the soil. Since nitrogen is the nutrient most limiting for plant growth, the understory of the alder develops a rich humus that benefits many other plants.

Often the first tree to grow in a disturbed area, such as after fire, logging, landslide, or flood, it grows fast in moist sites and helps a forest re-establish. Degraded stream banks are held together when alders root, preventing further erosion and allowing other plants to take hold and restore the local environment. As a matter of fact, alder seeds germinate best in disturbed soil.

Again, Native Americans found many uses for alder. A solution made from the bark has strong antibiotic properties and was used to heal tuberculosis and other respiratory problems as well as a wash for wounds. The blood red inner bark and the branches have been used to make dye. The wood is still used for carving bowls, masks and other items.

Alders, are short lived, seldom more than 60 years, and thus do not reach the massive size of other northwestern trees. Still, it is the most important commercial hardwood in the Pacific northwest, providing pulp, paper, bio-char, and a beautiful veneer for many furniture products.

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https://plants.usda.gov/plantguide/pdf/cs_alru2.pdf

Pojar, Jim and MacKinnon, Andy. Plants of the Pacific Northwest Coast