Native Plant of the Month

Red Alder
*Alnus rubra*

- When the inner bark is exposed to air it turns a bright red. This is the likely reason for both its scientific and common names.
- Red alder has catkins and “cones” on the same tree in the winter making it easy to identify. The cone is actually the female catkin and produces the seed.
- Flocks of native birds depend on the quantities of seed it produces in midwinter.
- The trunk is host to patches of white lichens.
- Native people used the bark for a rich red-orange dye, as well as for medicine; and the wood for carving and smoking salmon.

Landscape Value

Red alder is a true Northwest native and, though not typically planted in landscapes, will quite often occur naturally in Seattle landscapes. It is fast growing and improves the soil by “fixing” nitrogen from the air into the soil, thereby playing a vital role in rejuvenating disturbed land.

Red alder usually grows in groves and can be planted (or allowed to naturalize) in groups or in rows where the white patches on its bark often cause it to be mistaken for paper birch. Use it for a fast growing screen, or to reclaim disturbed sites, in wet to dry soils. Native wildlife will thrive in the habitat created. Plant with an understory of ferns, native shrubs and woodland flowers.

Text by Heidi Bohan
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