



Photo by Bradley Tinney.

Plants for Birds: Quaking Aspen

- **Scientific Name:** *Populus tremuloides* (Salicaceae family)
- **Height:** 40 to 50 ft.
- **Hardiness:** Zone 2
- **Wildlife Value:** Provides browse, cover, seeds, nest sites, and attracts a wide variety of birds.

Quaking Aspens get an A+ for their landscape appeal and tremendous value to wildlife!

We all know and love aspen for its aesthetic attributes—attractive whitish bark, shiny green leaves that shimmer in the slightest breeze, and brilliant golden fall foliage. But those aren't the qualities that birds are looking for. Aspens host a surprising array of insects and caterpillars, which then attract and nourish insectivorous birds such as warblers, kinglets, vireos, and tanagers. Plus, the fruiting catkins provide tiny seeds for seed-eating birds, and the thin bark allows sapsuckers to drill holes to collect sap. Ruffed Grouse feed on the buds and leaves, woodpeckers hollow out cavity nests in the soft wood, and chickadees glean the branches for tiny insects and larvae. And it's not just birds that are attracted to aspen. Mammals ranging from chipmunks and rabbits to deer and moose browse on the twigs, buds, and leaves. The trees

even support the larvae of such gorgeous butterflies as Tiger Swallowtail and Mourning Cloak—all this while the trees provide us lovely dappled shade.

Quaking Aspen are native to Montana and take the prize for the most widely distributed tree species in North America. These fast-growing trees usually reach 40 to 50 feet in height. They are easy to grow and extremely hardy. Though aspens flourish best in loamy well-drained soils, they are adaptable to a wide variety of conditions. The two conditions they will *not* tolerate are heavy shade and droughty soils.

Aspens in the wild naturally sucker, sometimes creating entire stands as “clones” with a shared root system. This can lead to some amazing superlatives. A grove of Quaking Aspen in Utah is considered the largest and heaviest organism on Earth, covering more than 100 acres and having nearly 50,000 stems sprouting from one root system. Since the root system doesn't die out as it reproduces, it is also thought to be the oldest living organism with an estimated age of 80,000 years.

Aspens are most appealing when planted in clusters of three or five or more. Create a little grove in your yard and add an understory of shrubs like red-twig dogwood, serviceberries, and spirea. The birds will thank you with their presence!

~ Paulette Epple

