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**Eye on the Environment:  
The Colors of Fall, the Beauty of  
Larch**

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for the *Seeley-Swan Pathfinder*

October is a favorite month for many Swan Valley residents. The air is fresh, the nights cool, and the golden glow of turning leaves makes you feel as if the sun is shining even when it's raining.

At high elevations, the huckleberry leaves start the season by changing to crimson, burgundy and plum. The MeFe, as we like to call *Menziesia ferruginia*—or fool's huckleberry—is yellow, as are the service berry bushes. The hawthorne becomes dark orange. The leaves of the mountain ash are orange, red and gold. If the bears and grouse haven't found the shrubs, the ash berries are brilliant red clusters among the leaves.

Down by the streamsides, red osier dogwoods are red wine this time of year. The birch and cottonwood turn every shade of yellow. And the aspens around the wet meadows are golden or glowing pumpkin. A tree on the edge of Doris Haasch's pond is bright flame, brilliant as Vermont sugar maple.

I'm reminded of a question my son Tor asked one fall when we were talking about trees that lose their leaves. He must have been about 10 years old. "Where are the barch?" he asked. I was

puzzled for a moment until I realized he had somehow wedded larch and birch.

Mushy hearing must run in the family. Tor's sister Kristin always wondered why John Denver would sing: "This old cigar taught me to me to love..." And I just got a phone message from my granddaughter Anna saying the family was fostering a chicken and at the moment it was sleeping on her lap in the living room. The second time around I heard "kitten."

In mid-October, when our broadleaf trees and shrubs are beginning to blow their leaves on the wind, the western larch paint the slopes in florescent yellow. If there is a signature tree for the Swan Valley it must be larch—born of fire, resistant to fire, excellent as firewood, designed for heavy snows, and gorgeous in spring, summer and fall as needles turn from lime to Kelly to yellow-green to golden.

Larch, as you know, gets its start after fire. The seeds prefer sunlight and burned-over soil to germinate. They are a fast-growing species like lodgepole, and the two often begin life together a year after a forest fire. In fact many of the trees in the Swan Valley are about the same age, having sent down roots after fires in the late 1800s or after the 1919 fires, which burned in the Lindbergh Lake area and elsewhere in the valley.

While a lodgepole is ancient at 100, a larch can live 400 – 600 years, some books claim 900. In such a lifetime an individual tree experiences many forest fires. Some barely char the bark when flames run through open stands. But a larch born around the time when

Columbus sailed would have endured many hotter fires. Larch, like ponderosa pine, have thick bark that protects the inner tree. When a fire burns through to the sap wood, the bark curls over the exposed part and protects the tree.

Fire ecologists count the scars on “larch cookies” to learn the historic frequency of forest fires in the valley.

One interesting adaptation of larch that ponderosas and Douglas-fir lack is flaky bark. Chips of bark pop off when larch trees heat up, apparently allowing heat to escape from the inner wood and cool the tree. Conversely, the thick cork-like bark of Douglas-fir, which protects the tree during low intensity fires, will pressure cook the inner tree during a hot fire.

I like to think larch lose their needles in November to protect them from Christmas tree cutters. Otherwise the handsome pointy shapes and the attractive ray-like needle bunches would make them irresistible during the holidays. But larch were adapting to snowy winters long before we started celebrating Christ’s birth.

One advantage to having bare branches in winter is that heavy snow can’t burden the trees. The snowflakes fall instead to the ground where the roots are protected from the cold.

I wish I’d had larch boards available when I rebuilt my floating dock last summer. I sawed my old dock apart and piled the debris in the hot sun to dry. After a few days most of the boards were full of air, very light and weak, but a few were dense and remarkably sound after 20 years. They were larch boards.

Pine siskins, common red polls and white-winged cross-bills, birds native to the Swan Valley, feed on larch seeds.

The cones might stay on larch for several years. One strategy for generating a young larch stand I haven’t tried, in deference to my neighbors, is to pile brush near a mature larch (not directly under) and burn the pile during a year when the cones seem likely to fall. The seeds will land in the exposed soil and find little competition as they take root.

A few years ago Neil Meyer and I were looking at a proposed timber sale high on a steep slope of the Swan River State Forest when we entered a grove of immense larch all standing on three or four legs. It took awhile to figure it out. Close inspection revealed gentle linear mounds lying down slope of each tree. Sometime long ago a powerful downdraft had blown over a large stand.

Larch cones germinated on the exposed root wads after the trees fell. As the young seedlings grew, they sent their roots down the sides of the root wads, which over time completely decayed, leaving the new trees standing on legs. I would like to find that stand again during the peak of fall color: giants with their feet in the soil and heads in brilliant sun.