

Edible Pine Bark



Eastern White Pine Logs

Freshly cut logs oozing pitch. This tree was over 3-feet thick at the base and eighty feet high.

Ever eat a tree? Survival Topics will show you how.

Where others starve, expert survivors find food; often in plentiful supply from sources few people know about. To survive where others fail you need the drive to observe and learn, the willingness to try new things, and the ability to drop all preconceived food prejudices.

In the Survival Topic Survival Foraging on the Move I showed you how easy it can be to draw from nature's food supply through knowledge of local flora and fauna and careful observation. Simply by keeping yourself open to anything edible that comes your way, you can obtain more food than you can possibly eat.

One of the foods I introduced in that article are needles from the Eastern White Pine tree (*Pinus Strobus*), which are high in the vitamin C you need for optimum health in the wilderness. Consuming pine needles or brewing pine needle tea is a great preventative and cure for scurvy caused by lack of vitamin C in the diet. Yet thousands of people have died of scurvy while literally surrounded by whole forests of pine trees! This illustrates the fact that knowledge and the ability to apply it

is an important key to survival.

In this Survival Topic I will introduce to you another part of the Eastern White Pine that is nutritious and easy to harvest in amounts large enough to be a very significant source of food for you and your companions during an extended survival emergency: its inner bark.

You will likely find the inner bark of pine trees to be good to eat at any time, whether or not you are in a food emergency. However the damaging of these fine trees is not advised unless you are in real survival situation or obtain pines that are being cut anyway during logging or thinning operations.

Identifying the Eastern White Pine

The Eastern White Pine is the tallest tree in Eastern North America, growing up to 230 feet high and measuring 8 feet thick at the base. These huge old trees can live as long as 500 years, though most of the giants have been cut for lumber in years past. Trees several feet thick and one hundred feet tall are now quite common in some areas.

If you take a look at the accompanying map you can see that the Eastern White Pine lives in areas that many Survival Topics readers frequent, from south eastern Canada down through Pennsylvania and south along the Appalachian Mountains. If you do not live in Eastern White Pine country do not despair; many other species of tree bark are edible and the basic principles of harvest and preparation remain the same.

The Eastern White Pine has evergreen needles in bundles of 5 that are about 3 to 5 inches long. The bark and cones are very resinous, and this sticky substance can be utilized in a number of ways including the making of glue.

The bark of young trees is a gray greenish color and is thin and easily broken. As the tree grows larger the outer bark becomes reddish brown, thick, scaly and with deep furrows.

Finding Trees to Eat

I never injure any living thing I do not have to. This philosophy bodes well with real outdoorsmen who understand the importance of treading carefully in the world we live.

Stripping bark from a live tree will kill it – the wise take only what they need and leave the rest; in non-emergency situations there is no need to destroy a tree for a meal of bark. For this reason until now I have put off showing you this excellent survival food resource.

Recently a large eastern white pine tree on a property abutting the Survival Topics compound was deemed a dangerous liability. This huge tree had grown to a height of eighty five feet and some three feet thick at the base. Because a nearby home was endangered should the tree topple over during a storm, the pine was cut and removed by a tree service. When the neighbor asked if I would like the wood for use as kindling in the woodstove I accepted her kind offer.

Little did she know I planned to eat it!

The pine logs were trucked to a corner of the compound. In the picture you can see me investigating several of the freshly cut logs still oozing with sticky sap and smelling of turpentine. By counting its annual growth rings the tree appears to be some sixty years old. In the far background of the picture you can see the tops several living white pine trees in the Survival Topics forest jutting up toward the clouds.



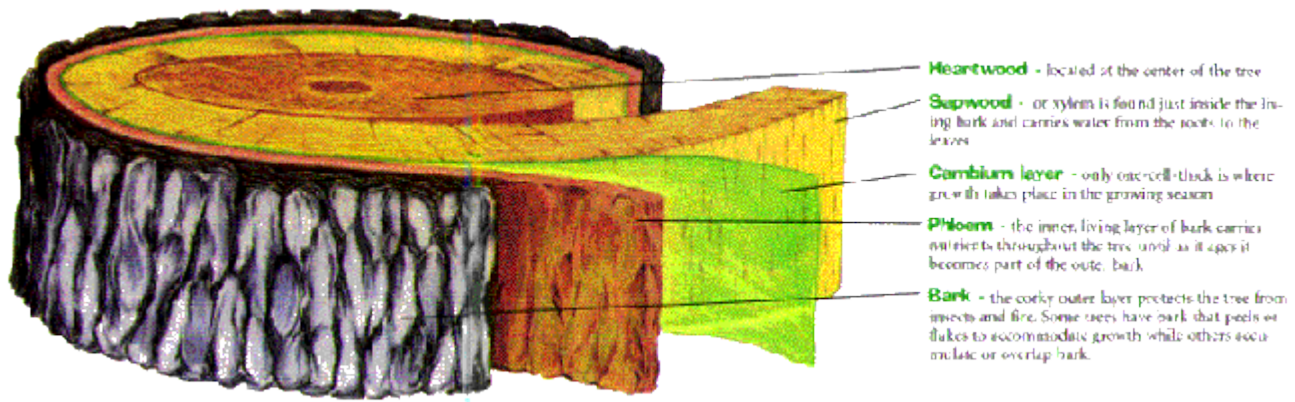
Peeling Bark

The bark on freshly cut trees is easy to peel off.

Simply cut a line through all bark layers down to the wood of the tree. Then using the edge of a tool separate the bark from the rest of the tree.

Now you have a slab containing both the outer bark of the tree and the white inner bark.

This is a slippery and sticky process, so be careful and have fun!



Anatomy of a Log

Native Americans Ate Bark

Native Americans included the inner bark of pines and other trees as an important part of their diet. Early foreign explorers of North America recorded finding acres of trees stripped of bark for food by the local inhabitants.

Easily obtainable in large quantities all year round, storable, and very nutritious, at least one famous tribe is well documented as making bark an important part of their diet. Their very name “Adirondack”, a tribe in the mountains of upstate New York, means “bark eaters” in the Iroquois language.

The Iroquois were a confederacy of Native Americans frequently at war with the Adirondacks. Calling the Adirondacks “Bark Eaters” was meant as derogatory name calling, much as you might call a mechanic, no matter how skilled he may really be, a “grease monkey”.



Slicing Bark

On this tree the inner bark is a full quarter inch thick.

The inner bark closest to the outer bark is tough and tastes resinous. Here I am using a sharp knife to peel the inner bark roughly in half, keeping the part that grew closest to the woody part of the trunk.

and have nothing else to eat.

More Survival Myths

Most writers maintain that the Adirondacks ate bark out of dire necessity, only because they were often starving during long cold winters when game was scarce and little in the way of other food could be found. But having experience in harvesting and eating the inner bark of pine trees myself, which I am sure few other writers have ever done, I maintain it is more likely the Native Americans relished the taste and nutritional value of inner bark and considered it a welcome part of their diet whether or not other foods were available.

That the Adirondacks ate a large amount of bark during the winter is likely due to its easy storability more than anything else. The misreading of the habits of cultures foreign to one's own is very common. If eating bark is a strange concept to you and you observe another culture doing so you may very well conclude they are eating bark because they are starving

It has been my frequent observation that many writers merely regurgitate what they have read elsewhere, rehashing over and over the same errors so much so that eventually the error becomes embedded in nearly all literature on the subject and is thought of as the gospel truth even by those considered an authority on the subject.

Where I show that most commonly accepted literature on boiling water to make it safe to drink is in error. When it comes to survival there are many other misnomers, myths, and misinformation being spread by those who have never tested the information they expose; a very dangerous practice indeed when it comes to those who rely upon it for survival.

When members of the Adirondack tribe came upon a large wind thrown Eastern White Pine I suspect they did what any hunter gatherers who knew the food value of its inner bark would do; they gladly harvested it.

So on to our own harvesting and preparation of edible pine bark!

How to Harvest Edible Pine Bark

When harvesting pine bark expect to get very sticky, covered with pitch from head to toe; it's all part of the fun.

I very much enjoy the smell of pine pitch. It brings me back to my younger days of axe work on survey lines and timber stand improvements in the Great North Woods of northern Maine and New Hampshire. Hard work in the outdoors is the elixir of life and the key to good health, as you must know if you live the life of an outdoorsman.

In the diagram you can see that a pine log is actually made up of a number of layers. Both the rough outer bark layer and the main woody part of the tree commonly used as lumber is non-living material. The edible part of bark is the "inner bark" or "phloem"; the actual living part of the tree. This inner bark carries nutrients from the needles and roots throughout the tree.

To harvest the living bark for food you will need a fresh tree. As soon as the tree falls or is cut down the clock is ticking; wait too many days and the bark will become very difficult to remove from the rest of the tree. However on a fresh live tree the bark is easily removed in large slippery sheets.

The first step is to remove a slab consisting of both the rough outer bark and the living inner bark from the woody trunk of the tree. Simply use a chopping tool to cut a straight line completely through all the layers of bark right down to the hard wood. Then slide the edge of a tool into the cut you made so that it is forced between the bark and wood. Work the edged tool back and forth as you pull the loosened bark



Frying Bark

Frying slabs of pine bark on a cast iron pan over the Dakota Fire Hole.

Grease the pan well and fry to a crisp golden brown.

with your other hand. The bark is easily removed from the wood since the space between is exceedingly slippery.

As you can see in the pictures, I am using a tomahawk for this process but any tough narrow object such as a small crowbar or a strong stick can be used as a bark removing tool.

The larger the tree the thicker the inner and outer bark layers tend to be. At the base of this large tree the inner bark is a full quarter inch thick in places. If I were to harvest all the inner bark on the tree I would likely have well over one hundred pounds!



Crispy Bark Chips

Fry the bark slabs to a crispy golden brown

The most edible and tasty part of the inner bark is that which is closest to the hard woody part of the tree (or furthest away from the outer bark if you prefer to look at it that way). The portion of the inner bark closest to the wood of the tree has an almost sweet taste. The closer the inner bark is to the outer bark of the tree the stringier and resinous it becomes.

For this reason I like to slice the slab of inner bark in half and discard the less desirable piece. You may have to experiment some in order to find the thickness of inner bark that you need to remove. This varies from tree to tree and limb to limb depending upon the characteristics of each individual tree, its size, and your particular tastes.

If a tree is under a foot in diameter, more or less, there may be little inner bark that is not resinous. This comes from my particular experience; in your neck of the woods the local pines may differ due to local conditions or genetics. Just as apples from different trees can vary in taste, so too will foods from other sources.

In the picture I am using a sharp survival knife for separating the tasty portion of the inner bark from the more resinous part which is left connected to the rough outer bark.

Cooking the Bark

Raw white pine bark is too fibrous to eat very much of. You can chew it until your jaw hurts and it remains balled up in one large mass. However heat the bark to crispness, something like a potato chip you purchase as a snack from the grocery store, and the bark becomes a tasty treat.

Some writers claim you can slice the pine bark into strips and boil it like spaghetti until tender and soft. I haven't been successful at this, having boiled the strips for several hours with no good result. Once again, I suspect this method may be espoused by armchair survivalists who rarely actually do what they write about but merely plagiarize from one another ad infinitum. Since fresh inner pine bark has something of the characteristics of wet pasta, being limp, light colored and slippery, it could be someone made the connection and other writers are simply copying the idea into their own texts.

If you have managed to make edible spaghetti out of the inner bark of Eastern White Pines, please contact me as I would very much like to know how you did it.

In the pictures you can see me cooking the harvest of inner bark over a Dakota Fire Hole using a couple of methods. The first, perhaps my favorite, is frying the bark in olive oil to a golden brown on a cast iron frying pan. This is done much as you would fry slabs of bacon. Of course you can use any edible oil depending upon your tastes or what you have available.

In my fingers is a fried and ready to eat bark chip. It is a little dark in color as it is slightly overcooked; cooking and taking pictures at the same time is not conducive to gourmet results!

I can easily eat a bag full of these crunchy bark chips as a snack, and certainly they would be a welcome addition to any wilderness survival meal. I can taste sugar and starches in this food and there are likely to be a host of valuable nutrients since it is the living part of the tree. A mess of fried trout, some dandelion greens, and a handful of pine bark chips – a meal fit for a king!

Another good method, especially for preparing white pine bark for long term storage, is dry roasting. Here you can see I have positioned a flat stone over the Dakota Fire Hole on which the slabs of inner bark are being roasted. Once dry to a golden brown the bark can be pounded into flour that can be used as an extender for other flours, as a soup thickener etc.

The most delicious way I have found to prepare the inner bark for eating is to shred it as finely as possible before roasting or frying. This makes the bark especially crunchy and fine tasting but of course takes more effort in preparation.

Try Eating A Tree

The Adirondack's knew what they were doing when they harvested the inner bark of Eastern White Pines as a valuable food resource. Easily procured in great quantities, tasty and nutritious, knowing how to eat the bark of a pine tree could very well save your life.



Roasting Bark

For long term storage you can roast the bark until completely dry and crispy.

Dried bark can be used as a flour substitute or stew thickener.