

GROW YOUR OWN Aspen



Aspen (*Populus tremula*), often known as quaking aspen, is a beautiful deciduous, broadleaf tree which is native to the UK and most common in north-west Scotland. Its leaves change colour throughout the seasons from copper brown, to bright green and brilliant yellow – a wonderful addition to any landscape.

Aspen establishes quickly, spreading underground to form natural groves. Mature trees grow to 25m and individual trees live for around 50-150 years. Aspen is best suited to a large woodland garden or for planting on open landscapes as in small gardens the roots will tend to send suckers up all over which are difficult to remove.

The best way to propagate a few aspen is to transplant (with landowners permission) existing suckers with roots to the new location.

Propagation from root cuttings

Aspen grows readily from root cuttings, collected from February until May on frost-free days. Collect from a variety of nearby locations to where you plan to plant your aspen so that the trees will have a similar genetic type. This is important because trees can be adapted to local climatic conditions and disease resistance.

Find a mature tree, expose the roots and using secateurs or loppers remove a section, ideally 1-3cm in diameter and 30cm in length. Place in a bag with damp moss. Don't take too much from the same tree to avoid causing damage.

Plant root cuttings as soon as you can after collection. Lay the cuttings horizontally a few centimetres apart and cover with compost. Keep the compost moist but not wet in an unheated but protected environment. After a few weeks, suckers will begin to emerge.

When these suckers reach 5-7cm tall, cut them off from the root being careful not to crush the stem. Dip into rooting hormone and plant into gritty compost. Place the cuttings in a warm environment and keep them moist – this can be difficult to do without an automatic misting unit. Within four weeks the cuttings should produce roots. After a few more weeks the individual trees can be potted. If prepared in the spring, aspen cuttings will be ready to plant in September/October. Trees can be kept in their pots until the next spring for planting in April. If you only need a few trees you do not need to cut the suckers off but can leave them attached to the parent root to grow up into a tree.

Lay cuttings as shown
and cover with compost



Aspen suckers taken from root
cuttings and potted individually



Propagation from seed

The timing of seed collection is crucial as seed quickly blows away. Collect catkins when the white down just starts to appear (April or May). For your own safety do not climb the tree to collect – only harvest catkins that are on lower branches or on fallen trees. Leave the catkins to "fluff-up" for a couple of days in a warm place. Separate the seeds from the white down.

The seeds should be sown immediately and very thinly on the surface of moist compost and kept shaded from strong sun, protected from rain, and misted with a hand-mister. Germination is likely to occur within a few days of sowing.

If sown thinly enough, seedlings can be left in their seed tray for the first growing season and then pricked out into pots or a nursery bed the following spring. Seedlings need to be very slowly acclimatised to normal outdoor conditions.

Planting

Consider planting in areas where scarce species like aspen are absent but may once have been. Always secure permission from the landowner.

Aspen are not particularly fussy when it comes to soil types or climate but if given the choice prefer humus rich, mineral soils. First remove all vegetation around the planting area to a distance of a square foot to reduce the competition from other plants.

Plant just below the original soil level and ensure all roots point down and are covered. If planting trees with bare roots, keep them in a planting bag to prevent them from drying out. For bare root trees, cut a 'V' shape into the ground as this will allow the roots to be placed and covered most efficiently.

If planting a tree from a plug or a pot then, using your spade, cut a square just big enough to fit the tree. With both methods of planting, replace the soil after the tree is placed and firmly heel in. This prevents air pockets developing under and around the roots which can damage or kill the tree. After planting your aspen give it a good water.

You can prune an aspen at any time but it is best to do so when the tree is dormant in the winter.

Did you know?

One of the oldest, largest and heaviest organisms on earth is an aspen colony. The Pando grove in Utah is a forest of 47,000 stems (tree trunks) connected underground by a single network of roots, genetically identical to each other. Scientists estimate Pando is at least 80,000 years old and possibly closer to a million years old!

