

Spruce Gum in Maine and Atlantic Canada

Spruce gum is the hardened pitch from several species of spruce trees including red, black and white spruce. Spruce gum results when pitch, which flows at sites of injury to the tree, has hardened enough to be chewable – generally after about four years.

Native Americans used spruce gum medicinally for coughs and skin problems, and mixed it with animal fat to patch seams in birchbark canoes and to chew. While on his 1853 trip to the Maine woods, Henry David Thoreau noted that his guide, Joe Aitteon, was chewing spruce gum when tracking a moose.

Spruce gum was commercially harvested in the 1800s by lumbermen, trappers, and a few full-time harvesters. Lumbermen would sometimes carve wooden boxes, often book-shaped, to hold gifts of spruce gum for their sweethearts, whom they would not see until springtime.

Spruce gum first saw production in 1848 when John B. Curtis of Bradford, Maine began manufacturing spruce chewing gum, which eventually made its way across the United States. Other companies followed suit, numbering 25 in Maine alone. In 1900, the annual spruce gum harvest in Maine was 300,000 pounds. Atlantic Canada also had its share of spruce gum companies including Row's of St. Stephen, New Brunswick and Melanson's of Church Point, Nova Scotia.

In manufacturing, spruce gum was the active ingredient in many cough and cold remedies from the 1800s until the 1920s. Spruce gum from Eastern Canada and Maine found its way into the remedies produced in states that had little native spruce gum.

Though spruce gum is found more frequently on older, larger trees which are sought out as saw logs for lumber mills, plenty can still be found in the woods today.