

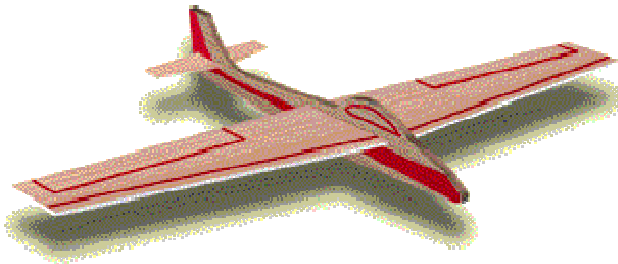
Balsa - *Ochroma pyramidale*



Tropical Height 80 feet to 90 feet tall with a trunk diameter of 12 to 14 inches. A medium-tall, thin tree, balsa grows extremely fast. It is ready to harvest in 5 to 6 years from planting. The best balsa wood comes from younger rather than older trees. Balsa trees are widely distributed throughout Central and South America, from southern Mexico to southern Bolivia and Brazil. Ecuador, however, has been the principal area of growth since the wood gained commercial

importance. It is often grown there in 5,000 acre balsa tree plantations with on-site milling and production facilities.

Balsa takes the blue ribbon for the lightest weight wood in the world - only 6-9 pounds. per cubic foot. It is not only the lightest, but also the softest and most porous wood in the lumber industry. The wood color is pale white to pale pinkish white or pale grey. It has a straight open grain with noticeable pores. Its fine, silky texture has a unique distinctive 'velvety" feel to the touch. Balsa has excellent strength and stability in relation to its weight. Balsa is very easy to work and sand. It is best cut with very sharp hand or power tools and knives. It takes nails and screws, but due to its softness, gluing is more effective and permanent. Balsa is almost never painted or stained as it absorbs most of what is applied.



The attributes of hardness, denseness, and heavyness are typically the most important aspects of hardwoods such as hickory, mahogany, and teak. In fact, however, there is an equally important market for very soft, very lightweight, very porous wood. Balsa's unusual characteristics make it desirable for a wide variety of commercial uses. It is buoyant, a good insulator against heat

and cold and absorbs sound and vibration well. A very surprising feature of balsa is that it can withstand some corrosive chemicals better than stainless steel! Balsa's value is chronically underestimated because of its association with model building and novelties - most familiarly that most wonderful toy from our youth, the model airplane glider. In fact, only 10% of balsa production goes into models and novelties. There are 20 grades of balsa wood; the price varies with the grade. Balsa has a long list of very interesting uses. Due to its buoyancy it is primarily used in floatation devices, life preservers, rafts, boat hulls and speed boats. Due to its light weight it is used in aircraft flooring, recreational vehicles, off road vehicles and subway cars. Also, in artificial limbs, bathtub and shower stall bottoms and theatrical props. Due to its porosity it is used in insulation, cushioning, sound proofing, vibration modifying and other musical and theatrical needs. Due to its combination of lightness and ruggedness, it is used by the U.S. Army for combat-ready cargo containers and for chemical containment tanks. In its veneer form it is used for the familiar novelties, model airplane gliders and other model building needs.