

OLYMPIC RAIN FOREST PLANT COMMUNITIES



The humid-temperate weather zone of the Pacific Northwest is an ideal climate to produce a lush coniferous rain forest. The annual precipitation here is in excess of 140 inches (3.5 meters). This produces an environment of stately Douglas Fir, Sitka Spruce, Western Hemlock and Western Redceder which reach gigantic proportions. The abundance of water combined with the fairly even temperatures create a fertile zone of suitable habitat for many plants.

Plants found in rain forest communities range in size from large fir, spruce, and hemlock trees to small wildflowers, mosses, lichens, and liverworts. There is also an abundance of medium size salal, huckleberry, salmonberry and thimbleberry brushes.

The life cycle of the forest is a perpetual flow of birth and death and birth again. In this lush community forest trees grow to mature adults 250 feet (75 meters) high and 60 feet (18 meters) around at the base. These gigantic trees finally die and fall to the forest floor, replaced by a stand of their offspring.

With the passing of the giants, a breeding ground is created on the fallen log for mosses, fungi, and lichens. In their growth process these help decompose the log into humus and soil. The spruce and hemlock trees overhead spread their seeds in the autumn, some landing on the decaying logs. New life begins on old as the seeds germinate and send roots down, through the old tree now acting as a nurse log. After the decay process is completed, the new tree appears as though standing on legs because the roots started above ground.

The roof of the rain forest is a canopy of tree crowns, and the light that filters through is an emerald-green hue radiating from leaves and needles. Mosses hang like grey-green tapestries from the limbs. The forest floor is covered with a green carpeting of moss, sword fern, lady fern, deer fern, oxalis, and wild lily of the valley. Between the floor and roof of the rain forest is found a variety of smaller shrubs and brushes growing between huge tree trunks, giving a full green appearance to the forest.