

Know Your Christmas Tree

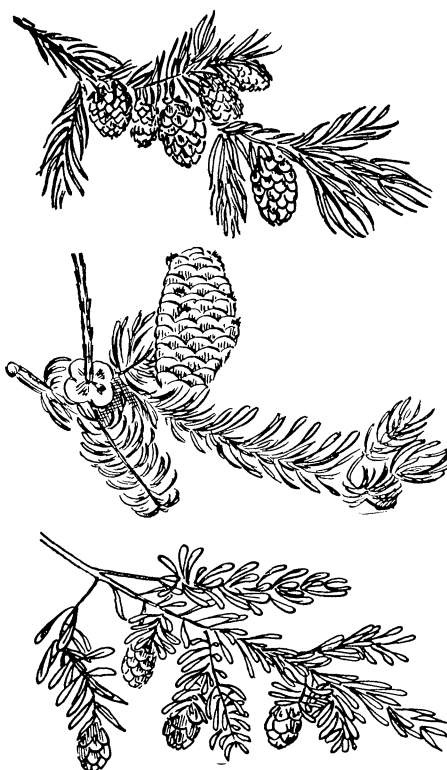
In summer, when all the woods are green, most of us pass the evergreen trees by, to commune with their broad-leaved brethren. Somehow the evergreens, in their heavy robes of dark needles, seem less friendly, less human, more austere than the others. Even the wandering breezes, that set the leaves of maple or poplar to whispering and chattering, only move these reserved old trees to mysterious-sounding murmurs. Longfellow caught their spirit exactly when he likened them to "Druids of eld."

But as Christmas approaches, and our lighter friends of the warmer weather stand like stripped and shivering skeletons, the pines and the hemlocks have their day. Even a Druid is friendlier than a ghost, the more so when he hides among his garments pleasant surprises of siskins and grosbeaks, coaxed to his arms by promise of shelter from the winds and a meal of seeds. We lose a little of our unconscious awe, and become more willing to improve our acquaintance.

There are numbers of evergreen trees to be met with in the course of an afternoon's walk in bright cold Christmas weather, whether one has access to native timber or to cultivated trees in a city park or on suburban lawns. Many of us find ourselves embarrassed in the presence of our Christmas trees, as we do when we essay to introduce a couple of friends and suddenly discover that we cannot remember their names. "I know they are evergreens, but I can't tell them apart," is a common experience.

Yet it is comparatively easy to learn the trick. There are, after all, not very many distinct groups of evergreen trees, and unless one is anxious to get the last fine details of specific distinctions, and hold up his head among professional botanists, he can learn the broad outlines and be able to distinguish the commoner kinds in the course of a single afternoon's ramble. The only thing one needs do is look a little more closely than usual at leaves and bark and cones, and remember a fact or two in connection with each variety.

Pines, though not the favorite Christmas trees, are still widely used, especially in the South. The thing to remember about pines is that their leaves or needles are always found in pairs or little clusters, and that their cones are usually comparatively large, with thick, heavy scales. If the needles are borne singly, or the cones have thin scales, the tree isn't a pine. Among the pines there are two main



Twigs of three conifers much used as Christmas trees: Upper, Spruce; middle, Balsam Fir; lower, Hemlock Fir

groups, the white pines and the yellow. White pines always have their moderately long, rather soft needles in bunches of five; with one unimportant exception the yellow pines never have their needles so arranged. Yellow pine needles usually come in twos, though sometimes in threes or fours. There is only one white pine that is at all common but the yellow pine group is very numerous and includes such trees as the Scotch pine, the jack pine and the long-leaf pine of the South.

The trees most widely used for Christmas purposes in this country are the spruces and firs; in Germany, where Christmas trees originated, the favorite is the hemlock. All of these trees bear their leaves singly, instead of in bunches, as the pines do. Spruces and firs can be further identified by their moderate sized thin-scaled cones, while the cones of the hemlock are very tiny. The spruce has hard, stiff, four-sided prickly leaves that stand out about equally on all sides of the twigs, and its cones hang down. There are two or three native spruces in common cultivation, and one very fine imported one, the Norway spruce, notable for its big cones. The fir has softer, flatter leaves, that are so bent at their bases as to form two rows or ranks, and its cones always stand up.

Bark and cones and needles of the spruce are frequently smeared with exudations of a very sticky resin, which give the tree its other name of "balsam."

The third tree of the spruce-fir triumvirate is a sort of botanical orphan. It is commonly called Douglas fir and sometimes Douglas spruce; but it is neither spruce nor fir. Its lumber is often sold under the name of pine, but it is not a pine. Its technical name is "Pseudotsuga," which is an outlandish combination of a Greek and a Japanese word, meaning "false hemlock," but it is not at all like a hemlock. The poor thing simply hasn't any proper name to call its own. And it is a very proper tree, too. Out in its native Northwest, where trees are trees, its trunks measure in feet what the common forest specimens of the East measure in inches. It would be hard to distinguish from spruce and fir by its foliage alone, for it is about intermediate between them, having needles stiffer than those of the fir but softer than those of spruce. But its cones offer a sure and easy means of identification. Projecting over each scale is a three-pointed appendage or bract which is the unique mark and stigma of the Douglas fir. No other tree has anything resembling it.

The original Christmas tree, famous in song in the land where Christmas is not Christmas without it, is the hemlock. This is the "Tannenbaum" of which the German children sing, and was the sacred tree of the pagan German midwinter feast that was the predecessor of Christmas in the northern lands. It may be known by its very short leaves, ranged in a two-ranked order down the sides of the twigs, and by its very tiny cones. Unlike the other evergreens, it consorts with the climax broadleaf forest on terms of equality. The most magnificent woods this continent ever knew were the beach-maple-hemlock forests of lower Michigan, now, alas, practically wiped out. In them the hemlock was an integral part; other evergreens, in other places, are trees of the rocky places and swamps and burnt-over areas—pioneer trees, hardy and tough and competent to wrest a living from the slenderest resources but unable to face the competition of the faster-growing broad-leaved trees when these invade their stand. The hemlock, therefore, merits special homage.

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