

DECEMBER 1-14, 2019 NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

By Dick Harlow

eCONIFERS & CHRISTMAS



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Before Christianity, conifers were considered special. Any plant that remained green all year long was considered special. In the winter after the leaves had dropped, and the color of the trees had disappeared, except for the conifers, they became a remembrance of something past and something to look forward to. Boughs of green over the front door protected the occupants from evil spirits and illness. The color green meant safety and gave hope.

According to the internet, Germany was the first country to decorate conifers or bring them into the house. City and townspeople would use wood in conical form, looking like an evergreen, if they were unable to procure a tree. Decorations were made of boughs of evergreens and candles, if wood was hard to obtain.

Today Christmas trees, conifers, are for holding Christmas ornaments, and various family decorations. For some families one present to each other is a Christmas ornament with a special meaning.

Assuming we water the tree as we should, we want a tree that will retain its color and whose branches will retain their green needles for several weeks, thus have good needle retention. Then there is the way it looks, conical in shape is the traditional look for Christmas.

Although we live in Vermont, we live in habitat that is conducive to growing hardwoods such as maples, aspens, oaks and other leaf bearing trees rather than an abundance of conifers, or needle bearing trees, unless you go to higher elevations. Now that doesn't mean you couldn't develop a Christmas tree farm right here in Middlebury; it just means that the climate is less appropriate for naturally occurring Conifers than for hardwoods.

Today, throughout the northern part of the country, there are Christmas tree farms. These farms grow a variety of conifers, especially those species that the area residents prefer.

The following is a brief description of some of the favorite types of conifers that are usually bought for Christmas in the United States and New England in particular.

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SCOTCH PINE



Scotch Pine, *Pinus sylvestris*,
© Woodies Garden Goods

Scotch Pine was used as the popular Christmas tree between 1950 to 1980. These pines have long needles, weak branch ends but strong branches. Their needle retention is fair for short periods unless trimmed well by the nursery. Only then will the tree have the traditional Christmas tree look.

Although these pines have been used for Christmas trees in the past, their weak branch ends and lack of needle retention longer than a two- week period have put them lower on the list of sought after trees.

SPRUCE TREES

Spruce trees of various species have been used for Christmas trees for some time. These trees do not give off much of an odor or fragrance, but they do hold up well in the house, and do provide strong branches to hold ornaments.

WHITE SPRUCE



White Spruce, *Picea glauca*,
© Nature Hills Nursery

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White Spruce is an adaptable conifer, conical in shape, but more space between branches, thus looking somewhat unkept unless the nursery took care to trim the branches as it was growing. The only negative aspect of a White Spruce is an off-odor when the needles are bruised or crushed.

BLUE SPRUCE



Blue Spruce, *Picea pungens*
© The Tree Center, Plant supply Co.

You can see the color difference between these two types of spruce trees. One is green and the other is blue green. Both are good looking for Christmas trees, hold ornaments well and will last through the Christmas season. The only down-side is their lack of, or very little fragrance.

FIR TREES

Fir trees, *Abies* genera are represented by 48-56 coniferous species that are ever green. These trees are located, usually in areas that have medium to high elevation. Thus, they are found throughout the Northern and parts of the Southern hemisphere.

BALSAM FIR



Balsam Fir, *Abies balsamea*
© Friends of Murphy (FOM)

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Now if you want the aroma of Christmas, a fragrance that permeates your apartment or house, Balsam Fir is your choice. Its color is green, in some trees maybe fairly dark, but its soul is the scent of Christmas in the air that you smell on Christmas eve and Christmas morning and until you take the tree down.

This tree is by most accounts the most popular Christmas tree throughout the country.

FRASER FIR



Fraser Fir, *Abies fraseri*
© Friends of Murphy (FOM)

According to the internet, "The species *Abies fraseri* is named after the Scottish botanist [John Fraser](#) (1750–1811), who made numerous botanical collections in the region.^[4] It is sometimes misspelled "Frasier," "Frazer" or "Frazier."

Another interesting fact about Fraser Fir from the internet: "In the past, it was also sometimes known as "she-balsam" because resin could be "milked" from its bark blisters,^[7] in contrast to the "he balsam" (red spruce) which could not be milked. It has also occasionally been called balsam fir, inviting confusion with *A. balsamea*.^[8] "

It should be noted that Fraser Fir trees are primarily found in the southeastern Appalachian chain of mountains; otherwise they are found in southwestern Virginia, western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee.

Taking the original thought process for the color green meaning safety and hope, and what the conifer engenders through the ages, we can understand why people consider Christmas family time, bringing parts of the family back together again. Some people even enjoy Hallmark Christmas movies!

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NOBLE FIR



Noble Fir, *Abies procera*
© Olympic Christmas Trees

The noble fir, is a western North American fir, native to the Cascade Range and West Coast Range of mountains in extreme northwest California, western Oregon and Washington State.

OBSERVATIONS

MAMMALS

Coyote
Gray Squirrel

Weather Tidbits

Month of DECEMBER 1-14, 2019

[*All Measurements taken at solar noon \(1230 EST\).*](#)

PRECIPITATION

Total Precipitation: 24.6 mm or 0.968 inches.

Overcast Days: 8