

NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

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Spruce & Fir Trees 101

Evergreen conifer trees take center stage in landscapes and homes this time of year. Here is a look at several spruce and fir species found in Wisconsin and may appear in Christmas tree lots.

Spruces and firs have much shorter needles than pines. Rather than having needles arranged in bundles like pines, needles appear singly along the branches. In addition, most have different growth habits than pines.

The extremely popular traditional Christmas tree is the balsam fir. Balsam fir has flat, short (about one inch) needles with silvery white bands underneath. Needles are very fragrant, which adds to the Christmas tree appeal. It also grows in the far northern forest areas here in Wisconsin but as you go south summers are too stressful for this tree. Unfortunately, spruce budworms are also a threat to balsam fir.

Another fir not for Christmas tree use but a fantastic addition to landscapes is white fir, also called concolor fir. Their unique flat needles are longer than other fir species and have a characteristic curve to them. Native to the western United States, white fir is somewhat of a slow grower but make attractive specimen trees.

Fraser firs make excellent Christmas trees but are not well suited for landscape use here in Wisconsin. Conversely, Douglasfir is both well-adapted for our landscapes and makes a good Christmas tree. Although not a true fir, it has short flat needles, very pointed buds, and unique cones with extensions called bracts that resemble snake tongues.

The most widely used and recognized spruce in residential landscapes is Colorado spruce, especially the variety known as Colorado blue spruce. These are large trees with a formal appearance and very dense, sharp needles (be aware if you are decorating them as a Christmas tree!). In the proper place, they can be very showy trees but need room to grow, but often they are planted too close to homes and driveways.

Another spruce with the same size issue is Norway spruce. This spruce is easily recognized by its growth habit of upright main branches with side branches hanging down and with large cones. These get to be exceptionally large trees that are not suited for most residential landscapes. Norway spruce is not used in Christmas tree production.

Finally, white spruce is found both in upland and swampy areas in northern Wisconsin. White spruce has short needles, branches that curve upward, and attractive small slender cones. Needles have a slight odor when crushed. It can be used as a Christmas tree.

Interested in learning more about
Wisconsin Horticulture?
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