

Confusion often results from something wrongly named. Linguists call such a misnomer. Webster's College dictionary defines misnomer as, "The act of applying a wrong name or epithet to some person or thing." Misnomers exist in the plant world in great numbers. I have discovered that common names rather than genus/species names have the greatest misnomers. The common weed called a dandelion is a perfect example. No way is there any resemblance to this weed and an actual lion other than perhaps its yellowish color. I've often wondered how it got its name. Consider the plant named eggplant? Do you see any relationship between this plant and a chicken, which by the way is an actual egg plant — if you get my drift?

Why do misnomers exist? My guess is the plant received its name long before its true nature was known or even perhaps before it acquired its scientific name (genus/species).

Of late, I have been receiving a number of questions involving evergreens. The name evergreen itself is a misnomer. Evergreen is the common name for the scientific name, coniferous. Since most people are familiar with evergreen versus coniferous, whenever they use the name or hear it, I think they interpret it as a plant that stays green forever, contrasting with deciduous plants that lose their green leaves. The fact is evergreens (conifers) also lose their leaves, but we call them needles and not leaves.

Unlike deciduous trees, coniferous trees naturally drop some of their older needles in the fall to be replaced by new needles in the spring. Natural needle drop generally does not occur all at once; thus, we humans often describe the tree as always green. Needle drop occurs normally within the inner branches of conifers. Pine trees generally keep their needles for two to five years; whereas, spruce trees keep their needles for five to seven years. Like any tree, if stressed due to poor cultural conditions such as insufficient water or excess sun and heat, a conifer is prone to drop more needles.

Some rare evergreens are more accurately called deciduous/coniferous trees. These include the dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*), the European larch (*Larix decidua*), and the bald-cypress (*Taxodium distichum*). These three

trees drop all their needles at once in the autumn very much like deciduous trees and grow new foliage the following spring.

As previously mentioned, of late I have been fielding a common question by numerous homeowners. Their question has been, “Why is my evergreen losing so many needles?” When responding, I try not to get preoccupied with the misnomer of evergreen versus conifer. Rather, I attempt to explain natural needle drop in conifers. I usually ask what variety or species of evergreen they have. I generally ask where on the tree the needle drop is occurring and if they can describe the color of the browning needles. Such inquiry helps me to provide a more accurate diagnosis.

Although natural needle drop in conifers occurs in autumn, there are specific diseases that also cause premature needle drop. For example, in pine trees, if the browning, dropping needles are located at the tips of the branches, the cause could be from a disease called *Diplodia* (tip blight) or from extreme environmental stress. Also, if the browning needles are dropping from the inner branches I ask the client to examine the color closely. If visible, striated colors occur as opposed to the needles being a uniform brown, the symptom may indicate another fungal disease called *Dothistroma* (needle blight).

When in doubt as to what the client sees in his or her evergreens, I often ask that he or she bring me a sample to view. I also suggest sending samples to the UNL Plant Diagnostic Center.

One thing for certain I do know. The word evergreen is a misnomer. Evergreens are not forever green, and, in due time, they will lose all their needles— just not all at once.