

People with tree issues often call me. If the caller neglects to provide me with the name of the tree, I always ask. Many times the caller doesn't know its exact identity. I then ask whether the tree is deciduous or coniferous. Usually the person can answer that one correctly. It's fairly common knowledge that a deciduous tree loses its leaves for the winter, and a conifer, also commonly called an evergreen, doesn't. Although it's not one-hundred percent accurate, that definition generally works.

I have also discovered that more people can correctly identify the name of a deciduous tree compared with a conifer. Most often they do so by leaf recognition. Like fingerprints, a tree's leaf shape, size, and form are unique. For example, maple leaves look entirely different from elm leaves. On the other hand, although the leaves of most maple trees look similar, they vary significantly from species to species. Recognizing their differences is essential for exact species identification.

Now that winter has officially arrived and most deciduous trees have lost their leaves, exact species identification becomes even more difficult. Being familiar with other distinguishing characteristics such as the overall size, shape and form of the entire tree, or the texture and color of the bark can help. Also the shape and form of seed pods, if present, and bud location are all features that can be used for identification.

Not all conifer trees are the same; but, customarily, all Christmas trees are conifers. To determine their exact identity, the attributes used to identify deciduous trees can be used to identify conifers. Conifers can be classified by their needles, cones and bark.



What genus is your Christmas tree? I share with you a few characteristics to differentiate a *Pinus*, a pine tree; from an *Abies*, a fir tree; or a *Picea*, a spruce tree.

The leaves of conifers are called needles. When determining the genus of a conifer, look for the number of needles that originate on a twig. If a twig bears needles in groups of two, three, or five, it is apt to be a pine. If the needles appear singly, it is more likely a spruce or a fir

tree. Spruce needles are sharply pointed, square and easy to roll between your fingers. On the other hand, the needles of fir trees are softer, flat and cannot be rolled easily between your fingers.

All conifers produce cones. Pines produce pine cones. Firs produce fir cones, and spruces produce spruce cones.



Cones are made up of scales attached to a center stalk. Seeds develop between the overlapping scales. The scales help one to identify the various species. Pinecone scales are woody in nature, with a rigid feel. In contrast, spruce cones are thinner and more flexible.

Bark alone is not a reliable indicator. The surest way to identify conifers is to examine the needles and cones along with the bark. In general

the bark of pine trees is smooth on young trees but develops a flaky, reddish-brown color with age. The bark on spruce trees is generally rough to touch and becomes furrowed and scaly with age. Fir trees have smooth bark that is often grayish colored when young but develops a furrowed appearance as it ages.

Hopefully, you can now identify your Christmas tree as either a pine, fir or spruce tree. Merry Christmas!

