

I often think of leaves being comparable to that of fingerprints. Although by visually examining a leaf, you cannot distinguish an individual tree from another individual tree within the same species, you can certainly determine the tree's identity. Most seasoned gardeners can differentiate between an oak and a maple leaf. Each tree species bears leaves that feature telltale distinguishing characteristics. With a little practice, you can easily master this method of tree identification.



The true test is during the winter. Knowing how to identify a tree species during the winter months when deciduous trees are dormant and leafless presents added challenges.

Consider the following activity. First, read my column and study the referenced websites. Then, pick a bright sunny day, bundle up, and take a leisurely walk around your neighborhood. Pay close attention to trees. Concentrate your efforts on mature trees rather than

young saplings. See if you can determine the species without the presence of leaves.

Although this challenge may initially appear complicated, after some practice, it becomes easier than you might think. If nothing else, you may find this activity enlightening and entertaining.

Take time to observe the basic parts of a tree, including the crown, the trunk's bark, the fruit (if present), the twigs and the buds.

The crown, often referred to as the canopy, is the upper region of the tree. Some trees form a pyramid-shaped crown while others are round or columnar. Some are weeping, some spreading, and others oval. To learn more about these shapes, visit the website <http://utextension.tennessee.edu/publications/Documents/SP531.pdf> titled *A Palette of Tree Canopy Forms*.

Look for the fruits, or seedpods, as they are often called. They may or may not be present on all trees.

Closely examine the bark on the trunks of trees. At first the bark on different trees may appear the same, but upon closer examination you should see distinctive differences. Some bark is smooth, some deeply fissured and rough, while other trees have peeling bark. Carry a camera with you. If permissible, take a small sample or at least a photo of each specimen.

During the winter, twigs and buds reveal some of the most distinguishing characteristics for identification. Observe the shape, size, color and placement of the buds in relation to the twigs. Bud arrangement (such as opposite, alternate, or whorled) is always apparent. Again, if permissible, take samples or photos.

Once back in the warmth of your home, log onto Virginia Tech's website. It provides a great identification key that will take you step-by-step through tree identification. While visiting its site, check out the more than eight hundred fact sheets on tree species. Each fact sheet provides descriptive information with pictures of the tree's leaves, fruit, bark and twigs

The website is

<http://www.dendro.cnre.vt.edu/dendrology/syllabus/twigkey/location.htm>

When navigating this website, first enter the state of Nebraska and Zone 5. As you work through the key, select the best choice and move forward. Eventually, with skill and a little luck, you should arrive at the correct identity of each specimen.

On the other hand, with our recent snows and sub-zero temperatures, perhaps you might be content with just reading and visiting the websites. Consider waiting until spring when the leaves return. After all, like fingerprints, leaves are the easiest method of identification.