

# Christmas Tree Varieties and Characteristics Guide

[www.PickYourOwnChristmasTree.org](http://www.PickYourOwnChristmasTree.org)

## Selection Guide to the Most Common Christmas Tree Varieties

Ratings: 5= best, 4= very good, 3= average, 2= fair, 1= worst

	Firs			Pine		Spruces		
	Douglas	Balsam	Fraser	Scotch	White	White	Norway	Blue
Needle Holding (without water)	4	5	5	5	5	3	1	4
Needle Holding (with water)	5	5	5	5	5	4	2	5
Firmness Branches	2	3	3	5	2	4	3	5
Fragrance	5	5	4	3	4	1	3	3
Needle softness	5	5	5	2	5	3	3	3
Cost	2	3	3	5	4	3	2	1

\* **Balsam Fir & Pine** needles generally cling onto branches tightly even after boughs have become dry.

## Contents

Contents .....	1
Firs .....	3
Balsam Fir.....	3
Canaan Fir.....	3
Douglas Fir.....	5
Fraser Fir.....	6
Grand Fir .....	7
Noble Fir .....	8
Nordmann.....	9
Turkish Fir .....	10

White Fir or Concolor Fir.....	10
Pines .....	10
Afghan Pine.....	11
Austrian Pine .....	11
Monterey Pine (also called Radiata Pine).....	13
Norway Pine .....	14
Scotch Pine .....	14
Virginia Pine .....	15
White Pine (a.k.a., Eastern White Pine).....	17
Spruce .....	18
Black Hills Spruce .....	18
Blue Spruce.....	18
Colorado Blue Spruce .....	19
Meyer Spruce.....	19
Norway Spruce.....	20
White Spruce.....	21
Cedars .....	21
Deodara Cedar .....	22
Eastern Red Cedar .....	23
Cypress .....	23
Arizona Cypress.....	24
Leland Cypress .....	24
Murray Cypress.....	25
Miscellaneous .....	25
Carolina Sapphire .....	25
Green Giant Arborvitae .....	26
Potted Christmas trees .....	27
Norfolk Island Pine.....	27

## Firs

Fir trees are the traditional Christmas tree for most Americans because they have the key qualities: great fragrance, short sturdy needles and branches and good needle retention. If keep watered and not in a hot room, they'll hold their needles up to Christmas.

### Balsam Fir

3/4" to 1 and 1/2" short, flat, long lasting needles that are rounded at the tip; nice, dark green color with silvery cast and fragrant. These needles are 3/4 - 1 and 1/2 in. in length and last a very long time.

This is the traditional Christmas tree that most Americans grew up with.

This tree has a dark-green appearance and retains its pleasing fragrance throughout the Christmas season.

Named for the balsam or resin found in blisters on bark. Resin is used to make microscope slides and was sold like chewing gum; used to treat wounds in Civil War.



**Balsam Fir**



**Balsam Fir needles**

## Canaan Fir

Similar to the other eastern firs.

*Abies balsamea phanerolepi*. It is very similar to balsam fir, and was once thought to be the same, but has been since determined to be a distinct species.

Canaan Fir has short, soft needles that are dark green on the upper surface and silvery blue on the underside.

It combines the strong fragrance of the Balsam Fir with the better needle retention of the Fraser Fir.

It is native to isolated pockets in the mountains of West Virginia and Virginia, but is commercially grown in many areas of the east Coast and now the Midwest.



**Canaan Fir**



**Canaan Fir needles**

## Douglas Fir

Good fragrance; holds blue to dark green; 1" to 1 and 1/2" needles; needles have one of the best aromas among Christmas trees when crushed.

The Douglas fir needles radiate in all directions from the branch. When crushed, these needles have a sweet fragrance.

They are one of the top major Christmas tree species in the U.S. Named after David Douglas who studied the tree in the 1800's; good conical shape; can live for a thousand years.



**Douglas Fir**



**Douglas Fir needles**

## Fraser Fir

Dark green, flattened needles; 1/2 to 1 inch long, dark green on the top and silvery underneath; good needle retention; nice scent; pyramid-shaped strong branches which turn upward. The Fraser fir branches turn slightly upward. They have good form and needle-retention. They are dark blue-green in color. They have a pleasant scent and excellent shipping characteristics as well. Named for a botanist, John Fraser Fir, who explored the southern Appalachians in the late 1700's. The only grow in cooler climates; north of Georgia, for example. In borderline areas, like North Carolina, Fraser firs only grow at higher elevations, 4,500 feet or above. They can grow on north-facing slopes, though, as low as 2,300 feet elevation.



**Fraser Fir**



**Fraser Fir Needles**

## Grand Fir

Shiny, dark green needles about 1" - 1 and 1/2" long; the blunt needles when crushed, give off a citrusy smell. They are yellowish-green on top surface with white bands on underside. The needles alternate in two lengths (on each tree) alternating longer and shorter which gives the branches a fuller look. Unlike the Douglas fir, Grand Fir needles are aligned in the same plane coming off the branch. Grand Firs commonly grow only on the Pacific Northwest coast.

The Grand Fir is related to the white fir, and is also called the great silver fir, western white fir, Vancouver fir, or Oregon fir. It mostly grows at altitudes from sea level to 1,800 m.



**Grand Fir**



**Grand Fir**

## Noble Fir

One inch long, bluish-green needles with a silvery appearance; has short, stiff branches; great for heavier ornaments; keeps well.

These needles turn upward, exposing the lower branches. It's extremely aromatic, and while it is native to the West Coast, it is gaining popularity throughout the U.S.

Its shape is similar to a Douglas fir but with a deeper, richer green. Known for its beauty, the noble fir has long keeping ability, and its stiff branches make it a good tree for heavy ornaments, as well as providing excellent greenery for wreaths and garland. Nobles are native to the Pacific Northwest coast; the Siskiyou Mountains of northern California and the Cascade and Coastal ranges of Oregon and Washington. It closely resembles the California red fir



**Noble Fir**



**Noble Fir needles**



## Nordmann

Photo at right. An excellent needle retaining species with soft glossy dark green needles. Nordmann Firs are the preferred Christmas tree of Europeans, with long, full, lush, dark green foliage, similar to a Fraser fir, but soft to the touch and with excellent needle retention. Nordmann Fir



**Nordmann Fir**

Christmas Trees can reach 60 feet in height with a spread of 25 to 30 feet. Their soft and lustrous black-green needles stem from symmetrically arranged branches, producing the ideal pyramidal specimen for a Christmas tree. Nordmann Firs are also popular as ornamental trees in parks and gardens. This tree is very popular in Great Britain. [Wikipedia has more information](#) and does [this grower's website](#).

See the photo at right.



**Nordmann Fir Needles**

## Turkish Fir

Also called Trojan Horse Fir -

The Trojan Horse Fir is native to Eastern Turkey. It grows large with dark green foliage accented by the blue undersides of the needles. The needles are longer, thicker, and shinier than Fraser Fir's.

## White Fir or Concolor Fir

White Fir has blue-green needles, with a whitish tint, are 1/2 to 1/2 inches long; nice shape and good aroma, a citrus scent; good needle retention.

They have good foliage color, good needle retention, and a pleasing shape and aroma. This variety has a dedicated following.

In nature can live to 350 years.



**White Fir, a.k.a Concolor Fir**



**Concolor Fir Needles**

## Pines

Pines are a good compromise between firs and cypress: they look and smell more like a traditional Christmas tree are easily pruned to a good shape in the field and grow well in the warmer climates. But they can produce a lot of sap and that is sticky. Needle retention usually is very good.

Pines grow almost anywhere. In hot climates, pines may be the only locally grown choice.

### Afghan Pine

Afghan Pines have soft, short needles with sturdy branches; open appearance; mild fragrance; keeps well; grown in Texas; native to Afghanistan, Russia and Pakistan.

Also called: Mondell Pine, Lone Star Christmas Tree, Pinus Eldarica.

[More info.](#)



## Austrian Pine

Dark green needles, 4 to 6 inches long; retains needles well; moderate fragrance. It is native to Austria, northern Italy and southern Mediterranean Europe from Spain to the eastern Mediterranean. It was introduced to the United States in 1759.

Historians suggest that it may have been one of the original Christmas trees, as it was worshipped by the Romans over 2000 years ago.



**Austrian Pine**

## Monterey Pine (also called Radiata Pine)

*Pinus radiata*, commonly known as Monterey pine, insignis pine or radiata pine, is native to California and Baja California.

*P. radiata* was introduced into New Zealand in 1859 and to Australia in the 1870s and has become an invasive species there, so cutting them down is encouraged.

It is the most common species of Christmas tree in Australia and New Zealand.

The seeds of radiata, as of all pine species, are edible.

Pine nuts have historically been an important food utilized by many Native American tribes.



**Monterey Pine (aka, Radiata Pine)**



**Monterey Pine /  
Radiata needles**

## Norway Pine

The Norway Pine, Also called the Red Pine (*Pinus resinosa*) is Minnesota's State tree. It has dark green needles, 3"-5" in length, big and bushy. The branches are strong and hold decorations well and have very good needle retention. Native to North America. It occurs from Newfoundland west to Manitoba, and south to Pennsylvania, with several smaller, isolated stands in the Appalachian Mountains in Virginia and West Virginia, as well as a few small pockets in extreme northern New Jersey and northern Illinois.



**Norway Pine**

It is not a common Christmas tree, as it requires a fair amount of shearing while growing to have a nice shape, and like all pines, sticky sap is a problem in a house.

**Ponderosa Pine** - needles lighter colored than Austrian Pine; good needle retention; needles 5" - 10" long. [More info](#) .



**Norway Pine (Red Pine) needles**

## Scotch Pine

Most common Christmas tree; stiff branches; stiff, dark green needles one inch long; holds needles for four weeks; needles will stay on even when dry; has open appearance and more room for ornaments; keeps aroma throughout the season; introduced into United States by European settlers.

The color is a bright green. The most common Christmas tree in the U.S., the scotch pine has an excellent survival rate, is easy to replant and will remain fresh throughout the holiday season. If you want a potted tree to use as a Christmas tree and then plant after Christmas, Scotch Pine works well for that.

See photo at right and [click here for a close-up photo of tree](#) .



Scotch Pine



Scotch Pine needles

## Virginia Pine

Dark green needles are 1 and 1/2" - 3" long in twisted pairs; strong branches enabling it to hold heavy ornaments; strong aromatic pine scent; a popular southern Christmas tree.

The branches are stout and woody and respond very well to trimming.

It is small- medium in size and its foliage becomes extremely dense.

Aside from being a good nesting site for woodpeckers, the Virginia pine continues to be the most popular Christmas tree in the South.



**Virginia Pine**



**Virginia Pine needles**



## White Pine (a.k.a., Eastern White Pine)

Soft, blue-green needles, 2 to 5 inches long in bundles of five; retains needles throughout the holiday season; very full appearance; little or no fragrance; less allergic reactions as compared to more fragrant trees.

The largest pine in the U.S., the White Pine has soft, flexible needles and is bluish-green in color. Needles are 2 and 1/2 - 5 in. long.

White Pines have good needle retention, but have little aroma. They are the state tree of Michigan & Maine; slender branches will support fewer and smaller decorations as compared to Scotch pine.

They aren't recommended for heavy ornaments. Its wood is used in cabinets, interior finish and carving.

Weird fact: Native Americans used the inner bark as food. Early colonists used the inner bark to make cough medicine.



**Eastern White Pine**



**Eastern White Pine needles**

## Spruce

Spruce are generally more like the firs in appearance, with short, stiff needles and branches that hold ornaments well. Blue and White Spruce have a particularly beautiful color.

### Black Hills Spruce

*Pinus glauca var. densata* - green to blue-green needles; 1/3" to 1/4" long; stiff needles may be difficult to handle for small children. [More info.](#)

### Blue Spruce

*Picea pungens* - dark green to powdery blue needles.

The needles are very stiff, 3/4" to 1 and 1/2" long; good form; will drop needles in a warm room; symmetrical; but is still best among species for needle retention.

Branches are stiff and will support many heavy decorations. State tree of Utah & Colorado. Can live in nature 600-800 years.

The needles really do have a bluish look to them, as shown in the



**Blue Spruce Needles**



**Blue Spruce**

## Colorado Blue Spruce

Often used for stuffing pine-pillows, these sharp needles are 1 - 1 and 1/2 in. in length.

This tree is a beautiful bluish-gray in color... but has an unpleasant odor when needles are crushed.

As a Christmas Tree, it has naturally good symmetrical form and has attractive blue foliage. It also has good needle retention.



**Colorado Blue Spruce**



**Colorado Blue Spruce  
needles**

## Meyer Spruce

Similar to blue spruce with symmetrical strong branches that are great for hanging heavy ornaments. They are known for excellent needle retention.

## Norway Spruce

The needles are 1/2" - 1" long and shiny, dark green.

Needle retention is poor without proper care; strong fragrance; nice conical shape.

Very popular in Europe where it is also widely planted for use as a Christmas tree. Every Christmas, the Norwegian capital city, Oslo, provides the cities of London (the Trafalgar Square Christmas tree), Edinburgh and Washington D.C. with a Norway spruce, which is placed at the most central square of each city.

This is mainly a sign of gratitude for the aid these countries gave during the Second World War.

**Serbian Spruce** - Serbian spruce is native to a small region along the upper Drina river of Bosnia, Serbia and Yugoslavia, in Southeastern Europe. It tends to be tall and slender, with upswept branches.

Serbian is one of the few spruces with flat needles like a hemlock, not the four-sided needles of most spruces. The needles are short, 1/2 inch to 1 inch long with lustrous dark green above with an underside that has two broad, white bands. These bands give it a silvery look.



## White Spruce

Has needles 1/2 to 3/4 inch long; green to bluish-green, short, stiff needles; crushed needles have an unpleasant odor; good needle retention. State tree of South Dakota.

The White Spruce is excellent for ornaments; it's short, stiff needles are 1/2 - 3/4 in. long and have a blunt tip. They are bluish-green - green in color, but have a bad aroma when needles are crushed.

They have excellent foliage color and have a good, natural shape.

The needle retention is better in a White Spruce than it is among other spruces.



White Spruce



White Spruces  
needles

## Cedars

Cedars are only commonly used as Christmas trees in hot climates where the firs will not grow - and people want to cut a tree locally. So you will see them in places like Arizona, Texas and the Deep South.

## Deodara Cedar

Drooping branches with needles that may be either green or bluish-green needles.

The branches become pendulous at the tips. Deodara is native to Himalayas and the Deodara wood in Asia was used to build temples. In ancient Egypt Deodara wood was used to make coffins for mummies.

[Deodara Cedar More info](#)



**Deodara Cedar**

## Eastern Red Cedar

Has leaves that are a dark, shiny, green color; sticky to the touch; good scent; can dry out quickly; may last just 2-3 weeks; a southern Christmas tree.

The eastern red cedar is a traditional Southern Christmas Tree as it grows native there, while firs can't grow in the heat.

The color can vary from dark green to bluish silver during the summer months and then bronze, red or even purple after frost.

Easter red cedars can reach heights of over 40 feet. It has a good aroma which reminds you of its roots (it is not a true cedar, but rather a member of the juniper family). It is closely related to *Juniperus scopulorum*, the Rocky Mountain juniper.



**Eastern Red Cedar**

## Cypress

Thanks to growing well in the heat (unlike firs) Cypress are the most commonly growth Christmas tree in the deep South. Their needles are soft to the touch, but the branches aim upwards, rather than straight out, and are not great at holding heave ornaments.

## Arizona Cypress

Native southwestern cypress with soft-textured gray-green foliage.



Arizona Cypress

## Leland Cypress

The foliage is dark green to gray color; has upright branches with a feathery appearance;

has a light scent; good for people with allergies to other Christmas tree types. The most popular Christmas tree in the South-East, the Leyland Cypress is dark green - gray in color and has very little aroma. The needles are soft and won't hurt even a toddler. Because it is not in the Pine or Fir family, it does not produce sap, so that those with an allergy to sap can still enjoy a Leyland as their Christmas Tree. If you live in very warm climates, like the Deep South, the Leyland may be your only choice if you want to cut your own tree. [More info](#) .



Leyland Cypress  
Needles



Leyland Cypress



## Murray Cypress

This is a variant of the Leyland Cypress that is said to have improved qualities for the growers. As a consumer, it is identical to the Leyland (no perceptible differences). Growers say it has improved disease resistance, grows faster, stronger branching, better tolerance for partially wet soil and has a stronger root system.

## Miscellaneous

### Carolina Sapphire

*Cupressus arizonica var. glabra* -  
'Carolina Sapphire'

Has *steely, blue needles; dense, lacy foliage; yellow flowers and nice scent; smells like a cross between lemon and mint.* [More info](#) .

- *Grows well in the deep South so this may be a good choice if you want to cut your own tree at a choose-and-cut tree farm in the Deep South.*



**Carolina Sapphire**

## Green Giant Arborvitae

Green Giant arborvitae is a big, fast-growing evergreen that will probably top out at around 60 feet tall but with a basal spread of around 15 to 20 feet. Its fast growth and natural exclamation mark form makes it ideally suited for screening. It can be pruned to manage its size. It is a hybrid of *Thuja standishii* (Japanese Arborvitae) and *T. plicata* (Western Red Cedar). Part of Green Giant's popularity is because it's being used to replace Leyland cypress hedges that have begun developing disease problems across the southeast. So, if you get a rooted arborvitae, you can plant it after Christmas!



**Arborvitae**

## Potted Christmas trees

### Norfolk Island Pine

A tree from the tropics, these make a great houseplant AND they look great decorated as a Christmas tree.

- [See this page for more information about Norfolk Island Pines.](#)
- [And this page has information about tropical trees of Florida .](#)



**Norfolk Island Pine**

*Australians occasionally use a native plant called Australian Christmas tree, (Nuytsia floribunda, aka moodjar) as a living tree.*