

Common Trees

Tahoe National Forest



General Information

The Tahoe National Forest is home to a large variety of trees, both coniferous and deciduous. There are many tree species in the forest. Due to elevation ranging from 500 feet in the foothills to 9000 feet in the alpine Sierras there are more types of trees. Trees are noted for their beauty and for their importance in ecosystems and their many uses.

Trees provide habitat to those of the forest who see it as a home and a home away from home. They provide picturesque beauty and health to the forest. They release oxygen so that we may survive. Trees are habitats providing snags, hollowed logs, and living homes. Trees provide food for the animals of the forest, such as acorns, nuts, seeds, bark, and inner tree core. Trees die and decompose to become more soil and nutrients for new trees, plants, and soil dwellers. Trees help forests thrive.

Coniferous Trees

Sugar Pine

Pinus lambertiana

Sugar pines and their cones are the largest of any pine on the Tahoe National Forest. Their cones are generally 14 – 24 inches and can be seen hanging from the ends of the branches. The needles are fairly short, only 3 – 5 inches, and come in bundles of five.

Sugar pines are found on the western side of the forest up to 7,500 ft. in elevation. Sugar pines are important for their longevity, their wood, and their cones.

A non-native blister rust has been decimating sugar pine groves of the Tahoe National Forest for many years. The Forest Service has identified rust resistant trees throughout the forest and collected the seeds from those cones to try and generate trees that will remain rust resistant so that the sugar pine will continue to flourish.

Ponderosa Pine

Pinus ponderosa

Ponderosa Pine is a very dominant species found in low to mid elevations on the west side of the forest. The cone is prickly and the 8 inch needles come in bundles of three. The bark is formed in a jigsaw puzzle pattern with the underside yellow.

Jeffrey Pine

Pinus jeffreyi

Jeffrey pine, is similar to the Ponderosa, with a few notable exceptions. The cones are slightly larger and not prickly when grasped with both hands, hence the phrase “Gentle Jeffrey or Prickly Ponderosa”. The bark of the Jeffrey often smells sweet like vanilla, butterscotch, or pineapple. The Jeffrey pine is also often found at a higher elevation, and is more common on the east side of the forest.

Incense Cedar

Calocedrus decurrens

Incense Cedar is a common conifer, found in both shade and sun and therefore present in many areas of the Tahoe National Forest. The bark of the cedar is fibrous and appears shaggy. It has small cones that hold and release only two seeds. The branches are formed in flat sprays and are quite fragrant.



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Douglas Fir

Pseudotsuga menziesii

Douglas Fir are quite common below 6,000 ft elevation. Unlike pine with needles growing in bunches, the short needles of the Douglas fir grow signally off the length of the branch. Douglas fir needles are usually 1 - 2 inches long and encircle branches on all sides. The cones are a reddish brown in color with small three pronged extensions amidst the bracts.

White Fir

Abies Concolor

White Fir has similar needles to Douglas Fir, however they are flatter. The cones sit vertically on the top branches of the tree and fall apart to release their seeds.

Red Fir

Abies magnifica

Red Fir have similar cones as the white fir though slightly larger and the bark is a reddish brown. The needles are shorter and are arranged in a similar manner.

Deciduous Trees

Quaking Aspen

Populus tremuloides

Aspen are found in high alpine meadows and along streams on the Tahoe National Forest. The bark of the aspen is white and usually peels off in sheets and was long ago even used as paper. The flat round leaves are well known as they quake and quiver when the wind blows and become a brilliant yellow in the fall.

Pacific Dogwood

Cornus nuttallii

Pacific Dogwood prefers moist, but well-drained soils at low elevations and north facing slopes. A straight, smooth-barked trunk radiates tiers of ascending branches tipped by creamy flowers in May, that can blossom again in late summer and crimson red leaves in the fall.

Big Leaf Maple

Acer macrophyllum

Common by streambanks and in canyons, the

big leaf maple is easy to recognize from other trees because of their large leaves (8 to 12 inches across), with five deeply cut lobes. They can be seen growing on the west side of our forest as high as 5,500 ft in elevation where they turn a pretty gold in the fall.

California Black Oak

Quercus kelloggii

Black oak grows individually or in groves and usually each grove is of one age-class, the result of profuse sprouting after a fire. Found from 1,000 to 3,500 ft in elevation, their leaves are about 5 inches long, with 5-7 lobes, spiny leaf tips, and usually a dark yellow-green. The black oak and their acorns were used not only by the Native Americans for food, shelter, medicine, and many other uses, but also by the many animals that live in the forest.

Pacific Madrone

Arbutus menziesii

The Pacific madrone makes its home on the west side of the forest in the mixed conifer zone. Madrones have oval leathery leaves and newer growth areas on the tree are characterized by the reddish brown papery bark peeling off or shedding. They can grow to be quite tall offering much shade beneath their canopy.

For More Information

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