USDA Forest Service
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rio Grande National Forest

Conifer Tree Identification

Douglas-Fir

(Pseudotsuga menziesii)

Bark: Gray and smooth with resin blisters on young trees.
Needles: Flat, narrowing before joining the branch, 1-1.5 inches.
Cones: Hang down, 3-5 inches, 3-pronged bract between scales.
Elevation: 6,000 to 9,500 ft.



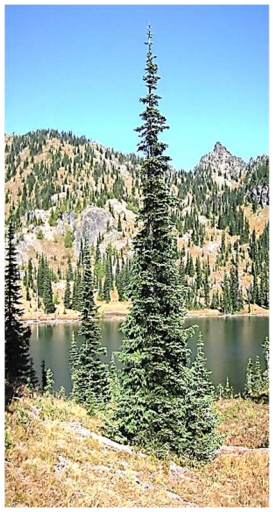


Subalpine Fir

(Abies lasiocarpa)

Bark: Gray and smooth with resin blisters (young); shallow fissures and scaly (mature).
Needles: Flat, soft, 1 inch.
Cones: 2-4 inches, purple, scales fall off when mature.
Elevation: 8,000 to 12,000 ft.





White Fir

(Abies concolor)

Bark: Light gray, smooth with resin blisters (young); deeply furrowed/ corky ridges and orange cracks (mature).
Needles: 2+ inches, lighter color.
Cones: Often a deep purple color to green, cones usually grow upright.
Elevation: 7,900 to 10,200 feet.





Ponderosa Pine

(Pinus contorta)

Bark: Thick furrowed bark; young trees have darker bark.
Needles: In groups of 3, 5-10 inches long.
Cones: 3-5 inches with spines.
Elevation: 5,000 to 9,000 feet.





Rocky Mountain Bristlecone Pine

(Pinus aristata)

Bark: red/brown with shallow cracks and flat ridges.
Needles: Clusters of 5, 1-1.5 inches, white dots of pitch on needles.
Cones: 3 inches with long, slender, sharp bristles on the tips of scales.
Elevation: 7,000 to 13,000 feet.





Piñon Pine

(Pinus edulis)

Bark: Gray, smooth and thin (young); red-brown, rough and furrowed into scaly ridges (mature).
Needles: Usually in clusters of 2, 0.75-1.5 inches.
Cones: Rough, 1.5-2 inches.
Elevation: 5,200 to 9,000 ft.





Engelmann Spruce

(*Picea engelmannii*)

Bark: Orange-brown and flaky, becomes scaly as it matures.
Needles: Less than 2 inches, more flexible needles than blue spruce.
Cones: 2 inches with papery scales.
Elevation: 8,000 to 11,000 feet.





Blue Spruce

(*Picea pungens*)

Bark: Orange-brown and flaky, becomes scaly as it matures.
Needles: Less than 2 inches, sharp, blue-green in color.
Cones: Over 3 inches long, irregularly toothed scales.
Elevation: 7,000 to 9,500 feet.





Rocky Mountain Juniper

(*Picea engelmannii*)

Bark: Furrowed and shreddy, reddish brown.
Needles: Small, flat and scale-like.
Cones: Resemble pea-sized, blue-gray berries.
Elevation: below 9,000 feet.





Choosing a Christmas Tree

The classic Christmas tree is usually a fir tree. They have a nice fragrance and soft needles. Engelmann spruce make good Christmas trees as well. Blue spruce trees take their Latin name from their strong odor; not everyone finds it pleasant. Pine trees will generally have fewer branches to hang ornaments from.

Choose your tree from an area that needs thinning to help improve the health of the forest.

Natural trees generally have less dense branching than commercially grown and human-sculpted Christmas trees.