

Conifers

By Barbara Wagner

Erie County Master Gardener



Scotch pine at McBride Arboretum.

In December at the Furry School Second Grade Garden Club, Master Gardener Jenny Ortolani gave a mini lesson on evergreen trees with an emphasis on conifers pine, spruce, and fir. The greenery of these trees helps brighten the winter landscape. Identifying them can be a fun activity for a winter walk.

Many of the winter evergreens have needles on their leaves. The needles can either be single or in clusters. Looking at the length and layout of the needles and the sharpness of the tips can also help in identification. The trees may also have different colored bark and different shaped cones.

Ohio Trees, an Ohio State University Extension publication by T. Davis Sydnor and William F. Cower, identifies several fir trees found in Ohio. These include balsam fir, white fir, Douglas fir and Nordman fir. Only the balsam fir is native to the northern wooded areas of the United State. White fir and Douglas fir come from the Pacific and Rocky Mountain areas and Nordman fir from Asia Minor.

Firs grow in pyramidal shapes and have whorled branches with single needles on their leaves. The needles of a balsam fir are $\frac{1}{2}$ to an inch long and are blunt tipped. They lie flat on the twigs and are shiny green above. Trees of Ohio by Stan Tekiela describe the bark as “smooth with many very aromatic raised resin blisters.” The cones on the balsam fir are upright.

The Douglas fir is the most popular Christmas tree in Ohio— also with a pyramidal shaped and single needles on whorled branches. This tree is not a true fir but was introduced to Ohio from the West. The needles are slightly longer than a balsam

fir and blunt. The foliage is green to blue green. The cones hang down on the branches.

Common spruce trees in Ohio are the Norway spruce, the Colorado spruce and the white spruce. Spruce trees also have single needles from ½ to 1 inch long but unlike the fir, the needle is sharp and pointed grows around the branch. Spruce trees also grow in a pyramidal shape. The cones grow down.

Colorado blue spruce has a beautiful green blue color that many people like. But it is also susceptible to two fungal diseases: needle cast or blight and dieback called cytospora canker. These can cause the tree to look half dead. When Master Gardeners toured Secret Arboretum in Wooster white fir was recommended as a better tree for our area.

Pines are easy to identify because of their long needles which grow in bundles. White pine is native to our area. Ohio Trees identifies it as growing on “high, dry, sandy, and rocky ridges” but preferring “cooler moister regions.” The needles of the white pine are 2 ½ to 5 inches long and are bluish green above and white beneath. The needles grow in bundles of 5, a distinguishing characteristic.

Several other pines grow in Ohio. Jack pine, native to the northern lake states, have short needles of ¼ to 1 ½ inch with two in bundle. Other pines with two needles per cluster include red pine with long 4-to-6-inch needles which grow straight and break when bent, Austrian pine with 3 to 6 inch needles which grow twisted and bend instead of break.

One pine like is Scotch pine. This particular pine has a reddish color to its bark. The needles grow in clusters of two twisted needles about 1 ½ to 3 inches long. The cones are small. Unfortunately, pine wilt and sooty mold are among the diseases that affect it in our area.

There are other evergreens in Ohio: Eastern hemlock with single needles, American holly with shiny spiky leaves and native arborvitae also called white cedar.

Two places to walk where trees conifers are present are McBride Arboretum on the Firelands College Campus and Shoepfle Gardens in Birmingham. Both are good places to go on a sunny winter day to look at all the evergreens in Ohio.