

Evergreen Identification: Pine, Spruce or Balsam?

After the [derecho ripped through Eastern Ontario](#) this past summer, I learned lots about the evergreen trees on our cottage property. I must admit identification of trees is not something I spent much time on with my [gardening business](#).

When we finally got a specialist to assess the tree damage on our lot, he mentioned that the balsams (AKA firs) are not as strong, hard, or healthy as spruce or pines. Firs are not suitable for lumber but are often used for pulp and plywood. Although balsams make pretty and aromatic Christmas trees, they are not as long-living as spruce or pines and are more susceptible to spruce budworm. After their needles are stripped by the insect larvae, the trees die and their bare branches then become fuel for forest fires.

I love and appreciate the evergreen population on our cottage property. While I could always pick out a cedar or pine tree, I did not know much about the difference between spruce and balsam. Now I do. They are differentiated by their bark, needles or leaves, and cones.

Spruce vs Balsam

	Spruce	Balsam
bark	rough with vertical cracks	smooth with resin filled blisters
needles	pointy woody attachment	blunt, flat suction cup attachment
cones	grow/hang downward	grow upwards, like candles









Pine Tree Facts

Pine trees can easily be identified by their needles which grow in clusters, although that distinction varies between red, yellow, and white pines. To be specific, red pines have two long needles in each cluster, yellow pines have three, and white pines have five. Needles grow up to 6 inches long.



White pine needle cluster

Western pines grow taller and wider than their eastern cousins.

Red pines are denser and harder than white pines and therefore considered stronger. Neither are resistant to rot though. Pinewood is considered softwood, best used for carving, construction, and millwork.

Red pine cones are shorter and more egg-shaped than longer, skinnier white pine cones.

Conclusions

Evergreens are beautiful with a backdrop of storm clouds or a sunset in summer, snow-covered in winter, in contrast to the colourful leaves on deciduous trees in fall or new growth in spring.

I now look at them a tad differently though, in terms of which ones will still continue to grace our properties.

There are lots more evergreen varieties around the world...I only researched the three discussed here for obvious reasons.