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Identifying Conifers in Your Neighborhood
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The most common pine trees in El Dorado Hills are the Pine, Fir, Spruce and Douglas Fir. And the most familiar species are the Ponderosa, Scotch and Digger pine and White Fir and Douglas Fir. Pinaceae, pine trees, are one family in the Coniferophyta Order. Conifers bear seeds on cones or cone-like structures and their leaves are narrow and needle-like or tiny and scale-like. The Sequoia, which also popular, is in the Taxodiaceae, the Yew, family. The best ways to tell Pinaceae apart are by the shape of the tree, growth pattern, bark, fragrance, cones -- their size and growing upright or hanging, and needles -- differentiated by color, how they are attached and whether they are clustered or scattered.

Most distinctly, pine (*Pinus*) cones are woody and hang from the branches. The cones fall whole to the ground. Pine needles grow two to five to a bundle out of the same place on the twig.

The Ponderosa Pine is the most common pine tree in California. It has a single trunk about four feet in diameter. The red-brown bark is scaly and puzzle like. Its needles grow in tufts of three near the branch ends and are five to ten inches long. The needles are bright green and shiny, stiff and sharp-tipped. Ponderosa pine cones' spines point outward, are prickly and grow three to five inches long.

The Scotch Pine is a bushy tree with sturdy branches and prickly needles. Cones can weigh two pounds and hold 3,300 seeds.

Digger Pine needles grow in bundles of three, are pale gray-green, sparse and drooping, and can grow to almost one foot in length. Its trunk divides at a height of from fifteen to twenty-five feet into a number of upward growing slender branches in an unbalanced somewhat round form.

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The Fir (*Abies*) is erect and proportioned and pyramid shape. The branches are uniformly spaced whorls. Fir cones are upright and fleshy and hard to find on the ground, because they shatter and leave spiky stalks on the tree. The fir tree needles are flat sprays and shorter than pine needles. They are attached individually to the stem.

The White Fir has needles that appear frosted or waxy and are a blue-gray color. They are flat and twisted at the base and have a woody fragrance. The needles are one-half to one inch long. One distinct way to identify the white fir is by its bark. Young trees have thin and grayish bark with resin blisters whereas older bark has bacon-like furrows.

The most obvious way to spot a Spruce (*Picea*) is by its needles which attach individually by a peg to the stem. The peg stays on the tree after the needle drops. The needle has four sides and rolls easily between fingers. They are stiffer than fir needles. Another clear differentiation is that spruce cones are narrow and have flexible scales. They hang and fall whole.

Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) has deeply furrowed, scaly and gray bark and an intense aroma, and its limbs beautifully droop. Its needles are dark green, soft and flat and are arranged around the twig like a bottle brush. The scales on the cone are thin and protrude with three pronged bracts.

The UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County wish you and yours a happy holiday season. Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome at the office, located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.org/Master_Gardeners/ and you can also find us on Facebook.