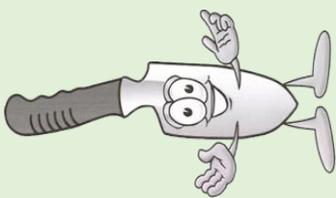


Trowel Talk!

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Pining for Cones

Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), white spruce (*Picea glauca*) and balsam fir (*Abies balsamea*) are often grown for use as Christmas trees. When harvested, they are under 3m tall and only about 10 years old but all would be very tall trees at maturity. While they may be too large for most city lots, there are many small cultivars that make excellent additions to any home garden.

Is it a pine, spruce or fir? Check the way the needles are attached to the stem. Pine needles, whether long or short, stiff or flexible, are always attached in bundles - of two, three or five, depending on the species. Fir and spruce needles are attached singly. If the needles are flat and leave a small hole in the stem when detached, the tree is a fir. Spruce needles are usually square in cross-section and leave a peg on the stem when detached.

If you want the classic Christmas-tree shape but in a small tree, here are two choices that get about 5m tall: *Picea pungens* 'Fat Albert', a blue spruce and *Pinus flexilis* 'Vanderwolf's Pyramidal', a pine with bundles of five bluish needles.

If you prefer something smaller, one of these three may do. Dwarf Swiss stone pine (*Pinus cembra* 'Nana') has long blue-green needles in bundles of five and forms a narrow pyramid. The light green dwarf Alberta spruce (*Picea glauca* 'Conica') and the silvery-blue Rocky Mountain fir (*Abies lasiocarpa* 'Compacta') both have densely packed needles in a formal pyramidal shape. All are about 2m tall at maturity.



Photo: Kelly Noel

A pine tree in the landscape has the perfect Christmas tree shape for seasonal lights.

A popular choice for foundation planting is Swiss mountain pine (*Pinus mugo*), a broad shrub with up-curving branches that give it a mounded appearance. There are many cultivars, all with dark-green needles in bundles of two. They come

in many sizes - from more than 5m tall and wide to less than 1m - so read the label carefully.

Two tough and attractive dwarf cultivars of Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) are 'Little Gem', a green globe and 'Nidiformis' which has an interesting bowl shape. An interesting dwarf balsam fir is *Abies balsamea* 'Nana', a small globe of soft light-green needles.

For a sunny dry site, choose a pine. They are tough, hardy and resistant to winter injury. Spruces do better

in a moist site and do not mind some shade. Firs need some sun but do best sheltered from winds and urban pollution in a cool spot with moist soil. All three evergreens like average well-drained, slightly acidic soil and all need protection from road salt.

Remember that the plant is already several years old when you buy it. When making your selection, look each specimen over carefully to find ones with nice symmetrical structure which can be easily maintained by occasional pruning.

In a suitable site, most dwarf conifers require little maintenance. The most important requirement is ensuring they go into the winter well-hydrated to protect them against desiccation.

Any home garden will be enhanced by a variety of small conifers in several colours and textures.

Kelly Noel
Master Gardener

December TO DO List

- Clean, sharpen and put tools away for the winter.
- Now that frost is starting to set in the ground, wrap shrubs that need winter protection (assumes you've put stakes in prior to freeze-up).
- Keep an eye on houseplants for pests and diseases. Reduce watering and fertilizer as their growth slows due to the shorter periods of light.
- Check any bulbs/tubers that are stored for the winter to ensure they are not too moist or too dry. Adjust the moisture level as needed to ensure the bulbs/tubers don't rot or desiccate.
- If you have a gardening or plant identification question, ask a Master Gardener (contact information to the right).

Tip of the Month

At this time of year, we seem to surround ourselves with poisonous plants – Freud probably has a theory about that!

All parts of the mistletoe plant are toxic to humans and pets. European mistletoe is more toxic than the American form but caution is warranted for both varieties.



There is a myth that poinsettias are poisonous. This is not the case, they are only mildly toxic to pets and humans. If a child ate five poinsettia leaves they would probably become nauseated, but it's unlikely that anyone would eat even one leaf, let alone enough to be fatal, as poinsettias are reported to taste quite unpleasant. The white sap of the poinsettia can cause contact dermatitis.

Master Gardeners of Ottawa-Carleton



Where to find us for free gardening advice!

ONGOING:

Telephone Help Line: 613-236-0034

- Wednesday and Thursday 1–3 pm (all year)

E-mail Help Line: mgoc_helpline@yahoo.ca

- monitored daily

- send photos of garden pests, diseases or plants for ID

CLINICS:

No clinics until next spring.

SPEAKING EVENTS & WORKSHOPS:

Growing Soft Fruit (Berries) – January 5 – 7:00 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

Greely Community Centre, 1448 Meadow Drive, Greely

Hosted by Greely Gardeners Group, (Guest fee: \$3)

The Gardens of the Lake District and Scottish Borders – January 9 – 7:00 pm

Mary Ann Van Berlo, Master Gardener

Ottawa South Community Centre – the Fire Hall, 260 Sunnyside, Ottawa

Hosted by Old Ottawa South Garden Club (Guest fee: \$7)

Dividing and Maintaining Perennials – January 19 – 7:30 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

CityView United Church, 6 Epworth Ave., Nepean

Hosted by Nepean Horticultural Society (Guest fee: \$4)

Flowering Bulbs for All Seasons – January 23 – 7:30 pm

Mary Shearman Reid, Master Gardener

St Mary Magdalene Anglican Church, 537 Highway 105, Chelsea

Hosted by Gatineau Valley Gardeners (Guest fee: \$5)

Edible Gardening – February 11 – 2:30 pm

Rebecca Last, Master Gardener

Almonte Civitan Hall, 500 Almonte Street, Almonte

Hosted by Almonte Seedy Saturday 9:00 am – 4:00 pm (No Guest fee)

Colour your Garden World with Perennials – February 13 – 7:00 pm

Nancy McDonald, Master Gardener

Ottawa South Community Centre – the Fire Hall, 260 Sunnyside, Ottawa

Hosted by Old Ottawa South Garden Club (Guest fee: \$7)



For more information on Master Gardeners, visit us at: <http://mgottawa.ca>



On the other hand, the holly plant is toxic. Ingestion of about 20 berries could be fatal to a child. If eaten, the leaves might cause diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, plus stomach and intestinal problems. Holly plants are also toxic to pets.

If you believe a child has consumed any of these plants, call the Ontario Poison Centre or go to Emergency. See your vet if you're concerned that your pet may have eaten these plants. Best to keep them out of reach and have a safe Christmas.