



Evergreens in Our Winter Wonderland

by Marilyn Loser

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My tree thoughts turn to evergreens in winter when deciduous trees are mere skeletons. And with our last week of snow, Alamosa evergreens have been beautifully flocked. The light, dry snow didn't bend the limbs down so I didn't worry about limb breakage.

Did you know there are only six species of pine trees native to Colorado? California has more than 16, the United States about 35, and the entire planet more than 100.

As a college student in Colorado Springs I learned of 5 species, all of which could be found in the Pike's Peak region. They are Ponderosa (*pinus ponderosa*), Pinon (*pinus edulis*), Limber (*pinus flexilis*), Bristlecone (*pinus aristata*), and Lodgepole (*pinus contorta*). While researching this column I discovered that the Southwestern White pine (*pinus strobiformus*), once considered a variety of the Limber pine, is now its own species.

Determining whether a conifer (cone bearing tree) is a pine is simple. If the needles are in bunches, you're looking at a pine.

My favorite is the Ponderosa. The Girl Scout camp I attended as a child in New Mexico was in a Ponderosa forest. We called it a puzzle bark tree since you could peel off outer pieces of the cinnamon-colored bark and they looked like jigsaw puzzle pieces. Of course we hugged the giant trees and looked up at the shiny, long needles. The Rocky Mountain and Southwest varieties of Ponderosa have needles in bunches of two-three needles and are from four to eight inches long, shorter than their Pacific cousins.

There are two excellent specimens on Main Street in front of the Safeway parking lot. You can find Ponderosa in the mountains surrounding the valley and see them mixed with Pinons as you drive south on Hwy. 285 near Tres Piedras.

Pinons are abundant in northern New Mexico and are best known for their wonderful nuts. And many people will say they make the best smelling campfire. Much smaller than Ponderosa, they have stiff, dark, short needles in groups of two. There are quite a few in town. Take a look along Hwy 160 in front of the Ramada Inn in eastern Alamosa.

Lodgepole pines are typically easy to pick out as they are aptly named. The first time I saw a Lodgepole forest was in Grand Teton National Park. We drove through vast expanses of tall, slender, closely growing trees with limbs only near the top. There wasn't much undergrowth as little light filtered down to the forest floor. The trees certainly looked like a good choice for a lodgepole or a log cabin. The needles

are in bundles of two and are about two inches long. Lodgepole needles are usually twisted – hence the scientific name *contorta*.

I don't think I've seen any in Alamosa. If you know of one, please let me know at Marilyn@AlamosaTrees.net. There are quite a few in the mountains north of the San Luis Valley, but they aren't in dense groves as in the Grand Tetons. In more mixed conifer forests, they often retain their lower limbs and look less like a lodgepole.

I've identified some trees in the Southern San Juans as Limber pines, but they could be Southwestern White pines – the species I'd never heard of until this week. Next time I'm back in the San Juans, I'll take a closer look at the cones. Southwestern Whites have shorter pine cones, usually less than six inches in length while Limber's cones can be as long as ten inches. Both species have very flexible branches – hence the scientific name *flexilis*. I think this is due to the abundance of sap – they are a very sticky tree with five needles per bunch.

Unlike most pines, Limbers have a taproot and can grow on exposed, windy hill sides where many other trees can't. In harsh environments, they can be very stunted and twisted and look a bit like Bristlecone pines that are often found growing alongside Limber pines.

Bristlecones are some of the oldest trees on the planet. You can find them in the Sangre de Cristo mountains on the east side of the San Luis Valley and in the San Juans on the north western side. They tend to retain their needles along branches giving them a bottlebrush appearance and the cones have small bristles on them – both are often dotted with white pine resin. Limber pines tend to drop their interior needles so the branches have tassel looking clumps of needles at the ends. I don't know of any Limber or Southwestern White pines in town but there are several Bristlecones in the downtown residential area. They're not very large – Bristlecones are very slow growing.

A future article will discuss other native Colorado evergreens.

“In wildness is the preservation of the world.” Thoreau