



What Species Is Your Christmas Tree?

by Marilyn Loser

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A Concolor Fir is on display in the Blue Room of the White House for the holidays. Also known as White or Colorado Fir (*Abies concolor*), it is native to the mountains surrounding the San Luis Valley. At first, I thought our Christmas tree, which we cut up Rock Creek, was a White Fir.

Now, I believe it is a Douglas-Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*). Sources vary regarding needle length. Most say White Fir needles are 1 ½ in. to 2 ½ in. long and Douglas-Fir's are 1 in. to 2 in. long. Our tree's needles are mostly less than 1 in. long. But needle length isn't what convinced me. I came across a post by ecologist Gretchen at DesertSurvivor.blogspot.com that helped me differentiate between White Fir and Douglas-Fir.

Both trees are medium-sized conifers and live at similar elevations. However, according to Gretchen, White Firs have grayer needles that are spaced out along the stem while "Douglas-Fir needles are brighter green and look like they have been packed onto the stem." White fir needles protrude off the stem at a nearly right angle and often curve at the tips.

I like her description of Douglas-Fir needles. "The Douglas-fir needles bend as they come off the stem. It sort of looks like they started growing in one direction (upwards) and then decided, naw, let's go out to the side, then we don't have to stand up so straight. The Douglas-fir needles are the "bad posture" needles, slumping."

You may be wondering why there is a hyphen in Douglas-Fir. That's because it is not a true fir and is, therefore, in a different genus. You may have noticed 'pseudo', meaning false, is part of its scientific name. I don't know why fir is in its name, but Douglas honors Scottish botanist David Douglas. According to Wikipedia, 'menziesii' is for Archibald Menzies, a Scottish physician and rival naturalist to Douglas, who first documented the tree on Vancouver Island in 1791.

Our 5 ½ ft. Charlie Brown tree is not as elegant as the 18 ½ ft. one in the White House. We try to select a tree that is crowding a neighbor with the idea that the neighbor will thrive if we remove the contender. We don't mind if our tree is a bit oddly shaped!

Since the 1966 the White House has displayed sustainable, farm grown trees provided by members of the National Christmas Tree Association (NCTA). Over the years, Blue Room tree species have included a number of Firs (Balsam, Fraser, Noble, Concolor, Veitch, and Grand), Douglas-Fir, Blue Spruce, and White Pine.

According to the University of Illinois Extension website, the most popular Christmas trees are Scotch Pine, Douglas-Fir, Noble Fir, Fraser Fir, Balsam Fir, Virginia Pine and White Pine. When I grew up in Albuquerque, my family bought Balsam Firs or Scotch Pines from commercial lots. Pines are easy to identify as their needles grow in bunches rather singly as do fir and spruce.

While local nurseries sell Christmas trees in Alamosa, I think most are sold at retail stores and I haven't seen any pines. Douglas-Fir is popular since it is very fragrant and hangs onto its needles. I tend to think of Balsam Fir as being more available in our area of the country than its relative, Fraser Fir, which is native to the southeastern U.S.

Not on the Illinois list is the Colorado Blue Spruce which people in the SLV often harvest. I love the way they look but they are not friendly! Just try shaking its hand (branch) – ouch! I'll enjoy them outdoors.

I like the idea of purchasing a living Christmas tree – one that you can plant later. The problem I see is taking care of it after the holiday season until it can be safely planted in the spring. With our cold temperatures, I don't think the tree would survive outside, in the winter, after living in a warm house during the holidays. Has anyone been successful with a live tree? Please let me know at Marilyn@AlamosaTrees.net.

According to the NCTA website, 25-30 million real Christmas trees are sold in the U.S. every year and consumers spent \$1.1 billion on fresh, farm-grown Christmas Trees in 2013.

Whatever kind of Christmas tree you may have, I hope you enjoy it as much as we're enjoying our bad posture, Charlie Brown tree! Please recycle your tree.

"...freshly cut Christmas trees smelling of stars and snow and pine resin - inhale deeply and fill your soul with wintry night..." John Geddes in "A Familiar Rain"