

Understanding Names of Oregon Trees

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Why do we call white fir a true fir? Is Douglas-fir a true fir? Is bull pine the same as ponderosa pine, or is it a separate species? Is juniper a cedar? Is incense-cedar really a cedar?

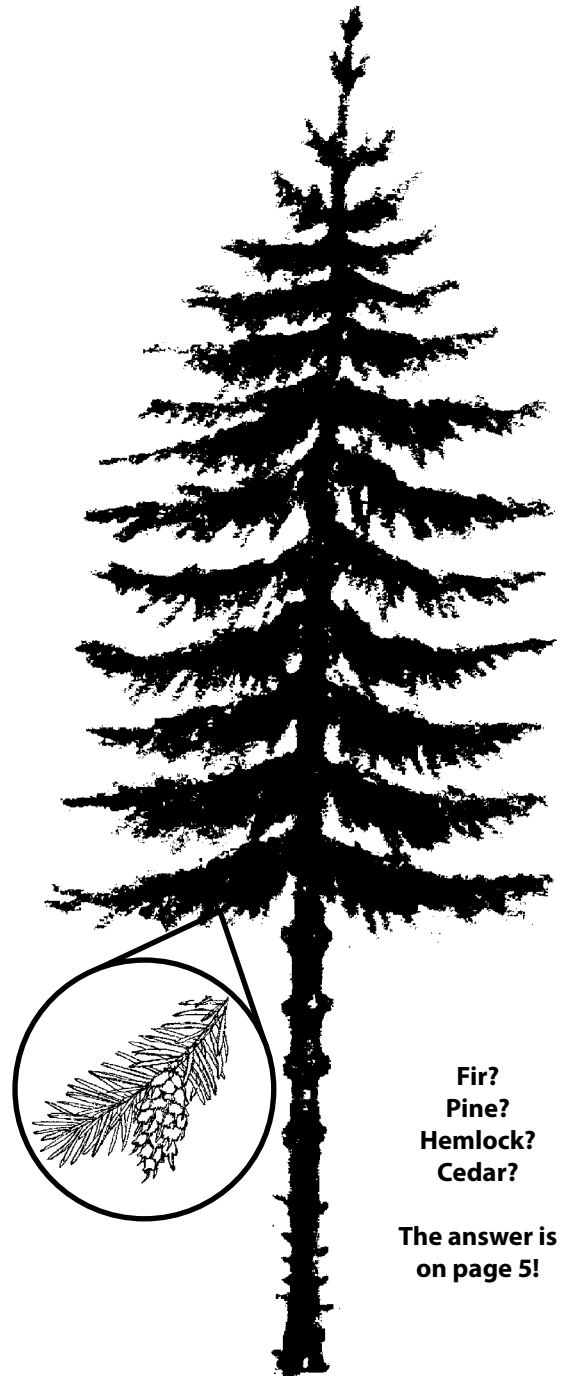
It's little wonder that people are confused by tree names. Foresters and lay people often name trees based on physical appearance. The wood products industry may name trees based on characteristics of the wood. And botanists name trees based on anatomical characteristics and evolutionary relationships to other trees.

To avoid confusion, scientists use the Latin scientific names, for example *Pinus contorta* (lodgepole pine). The first word in the scientific name refers to the genus, and the second word refers to the species. Trees in the same genus are closely related and have similar characteristics. Trees in the same species are capable of interbreeding. To put it simply, if you want to know whether a tree is a fir, pine, cedar, or other type of tree, check the genus name.

For example, unless a tree is in the genus *Abies*, it is not a true fir, and unless a tree is in the genus *Cedrus*, it is not a true cedar.

Another technique botanists use to distinguish the false species is to hyphenate or run together their common names. For example, white fir is a true fir, but Douglas-fir is not. And Atlas cedar is a true cedar, but western redcedar is not. This trick is not always reliable, however, because people often misspell common names (for example, by using red cedar instead of redcedar or leaving out the hyphen in Douglas-fir).

Let's answer some common questions about Oregon's tree species.



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