

January 2010

Plant Points

Plant Parade Conifer Concepts



Conifers may be the most noticeable trees this time of year, because of most of them are still green. Conifers get their name from the cones that bear their seeds. Unlike broad-leaved trees, conifers do not flower. Instead, pollen is released from a cone and fertilizes another cone. Another name for a conifer is *gymnosperm*, which means 'naked seed' indicating that there is no fruit around the seed as in an apple or walnut.

The leaves of conifers are covered with a thick, waxy coating called a cuticle, which protects them from drying out. This is what enables most conifers in Michigan to keep their leaves in winter, when water is scarce. The shape of a conifer also reduces the snow load it carries so there is less risk of a branch breaking under the weight of the snow.

The shape and presence of needles make conifers an ideal place for wildlife in the winter. They provide some insulation from the wind and cold and also hide animals from potential predators. As you hike the trails look for tracks and listen to calls to see who is using our conifers.

Although most conifers in Michigan are evergreen, the tamarack is not. Each fall, all of the needles turn golden yellow and fall off.

Our state tree is the White Pine. It is the only conifer in Michigan with 5 needles in a bundle. You can remember this because there are five letters in 'white'.



All conifers have cones. Even though the seeds of junipers and yews look berry-like, they are actually very unique cones.

Some conifers, like spruces, have single needles. Others, like the pines have needles in bundles. And some, like the cedars, have scale-like leaves that are very close to the branch.



Visit the Temporary Visitor Center for program information.