

Douglas fir

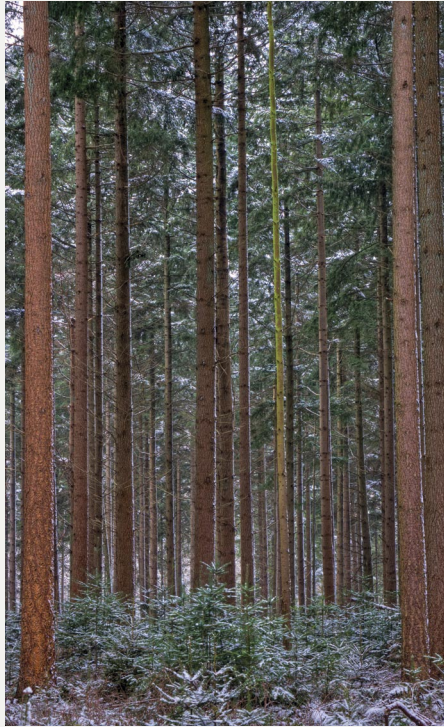
Pseudotsuga menziesii By Ellen Horowitz

We followed a game trail to a wind-blasted ridge on the Rocky Mountain Front. At 7,200 feet, most of the plants on this rocky, exposed landscape hugged the ground, except a few bonsai-like conifers growing in small, scattered clumps. As my husband and I passed the gnarly trees, one caught my attention. Instead of displaying the clustered needles characteristic of pines, the twisted branches held individual needles and the unmistakable cones of Douglas fir. On the west side of the mountains where I live, this tree grows tall, straight, and at much lower elevations. That weather-beaten, dwarfed form of the tree—known as “krumholz,” German for “twisted wood”—reminded me that the Douglas fir has perplexed and surprised people ever since its discovery.

INNUMERABLE NAMES

When the tree was first documented in 1792, early botanists couldn't agree if it was a pine, spruce, hemlock, fir, or something else altogether. Classifying it proved a botanical nightmare. By the 1860s, after numerous attempts, a group of botanists bestowed the scientific name, *Pseudotsuga douglasii*. “Pseudotsuga” means “false hemlock,” and “douglasii” honors David Douglas, a Scottish botanist who collected tree and cone samples in the 1820s and sent them to the Royal Botanical Gardens in London for cultivation.

Lumbermen and foresters were much less concerned about proper nomenclature. They used the names Douglas pine, Douglas spruce, Douglas fir, Oregon pine, red pine, and red fir interchangeably. In 1950, the scientific name officially changed to *Pseudotsuga menziesii*. The word “menziesii” honors Scottish physician and naturalist Archibald



Menzies, who first recorded the tree on Vancouver Island in 1791. Today, almost everyone calls it Douglas fir or Doug fir. For years, the name was hyphenated to indicate that it is not a true fir (such as a subalpine fir or grand fir), but most organizations and agencies no longer use the hyphen.

GEOGRAPHICAL RANGE

Douglas firs span a vast array of habitats and elevations, ranging from temperate rain-

forests on the Pacific Northwest coast to 8,000- to 10,000-foot elevations in the Colorado Rockies. With such wide habitat extremes, it's no surprise that Douglas firs are differentiated into two varieties: coastal and Rocky Mountain.

In Montana, the Douglas fir is found in the state's western two-thirds. Montana's champion Douglas fir, in Sanders County, measures 178 feet tall and sports a 223-inch circumference. The world-record Douglas fir, which grows in a remote area of western Oregon, is 327 feet tall.

IDENTIFICATION

One of the key features of a Douglas fir are its woody cones with three-pronged bracts, often described as resembling the hind legs and tail of a mouse. When cones aren't present, the tree's sharply pointed reddish-brown buds with overlapping scales distinguish it from true firs, which grow round, waxy buds. Older Doug firs develop a thick, corky gray bark with reddish-brown furrows. Soft, flat, single needles spiral around the branches and taper at the tip.

Despite the Douglas fir's easy-to-recognize woody cones, most people never notice the newly emerging cones, which are as bright pink and exotic-looking as tropical flowers. They start appearing in early May near my Flathead Valley home but show up later on trees at higher elevations. As cones develop, the young ones appear in various shades of pale pink and mint green. By summer's end, they mature and appear brown and woody.

USES

A lumber mainstay for the timber industry, the Douglas fir is often cited as one of the world's most valuable trees. It's also used for firewood and grown as Christmas trees.

Wildlife use Douglas firs for shade in summer, for shelter from winter winds and snow, and as places to nest. Dusky (blue) grouse eat the needles in winter. Seeds provide food for crossbills and other birds as well as mice and chipmunks. Bears eat the inner bark (cambium).

Some people gather the tree's tender, new pale-green needles in springtime and use them to flavor sorbet, ice cream, and even a type of brandy known as eau-de-vie. 🐻

Columbia Falls writer Ellen Horowitz is a longtime Montana Outdoors contributor.