

## NOTES FOR THE HAH ROUNDTABLE PROGRAM CONIFERS

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The name 'conifer' is derived from the Latin *conus and ferre*, meaning 'bearing cones.' Some of the most popular examples are: Abies (fir), Cedrus (cedar), Chamaecyparis obtusa (Hinoki false cypress), chamaecyparis pisifera (false cypress), Hemlock, Juniperus (juniper), Larch, Picea (spruce), Pinus (pine), Taxus (yew), Thuja (arborvitae).

Here is how one website, [www.thespruce.com](http://www.thespruce.com), describes conifers: "Trees and shrubs that fall into this category reproduce by forming a cone rather than a flower as a container for their seeds. It is this fact regarding reproduction that points us to the difference between evergreens and conifers. Most conifers are evergreens, but not all of them are. Do not confuse "conifer" with "evergreen." While there is overlap between these two botanical classifications, they do not signify the same thing. As you can see from the above, the former pertains to means of reproduction (the cone); the latter, by contrast, pertains to the nature of a tree's leaves (or "needles"). Perhaps the best-known example of the fact that not all conifers are evergreens is the Larch or "tamarack" tree (*Larix laricina*). In summer, tamarack looks like it would be one of the evergreens, because it bears needles. But this conifer is a deciduous tree.

Likewise, not all evergreens are conifers. Holly shrubs are evergreen, but they are not conifers because they reproduce via flowers, not cones. Beginners often become confused by these terms and end up asking the wrong questions. For example, you will sometimes hear someone asking if such and such a tree or shrub is "deciduous or a conifer?" as if it had to be one or the other. But this is the wrong contrast to draw. From the foregoing, you will see that the difference the person truly has in mind is between "deciduous" and "evergreen."

Some trees and shrubs that you may not think of as being conifers actually are (which is another way of saying that not all cones have the appearance of a classic cone, such as the spruce cone). Examples include: Ginkgo biloba trees (what people think of as the messy "fruit" is really a cone) and Juniper shrubs (again, what look like blue berries to the average person are actually cones)."

Conifers provide garden structure (or bones); are used as screens or hedges for privacy and wind protection; add visual interest by their shapes, heights, and colors; are the mainstay of the winter garden as they are mostly evergreen; can be specimens or backdrops to other plants; and provide wildlife with food and shelter.

Some can be sheared to keep their shape and size, such as Thuja, Leyland cypress, Yew, etc., and some can be groomed for topiary, especially Yew shrubs. Conifers can provide year-round color in the garden, such as gold, blue/gray, green, variegated with white. Dwarf conifers are excellent for small and part-shade gardens and in some cases can also be container plants. Variegated conifers also prefer part shade or dappled sun. Texture: some have hard needles like Spruce, or soft needles like Pine, or thread leaf like Arborvitae.

The website [www.homeguides.sfgate.com](http://www.homeguides.sfgate.com), adds "Most coniferous trees grow in the northern hemisphere where they form forests, which are called taiga or boreal forests. These trees grow wild across many areas in North America, Europe and Asia. Some conifers grow in the Southern Hemisphere in places such as New Zealand and Chile. Coniferous trees are adapted to survive cold weather and acidic soil found in these locations. Most conifers produce male, pollen-bearing cones and female, seed-bearing cones. Both types of cones appear on the same plant. The male cones do not last as long as the female cones. Yews and junipers are the exception. These two varieties are dioecious plants, which means they come in male and female plants.

The leaves of coniferous trees resemble needles. Conifer needles protect themselves with a waxy outer coat, which stops moisture evaporation from freezing temperatures. The flexible needles allow snow and ice to slide off the branches. The leaves provide the key to identifying coniferous trees. Single needles spaced out on the branches indicate that the tree is a fir, Douglas fir or a spruce tree. Needles appearing in bundles belong to pine trees, while clustered needles are found on larch trees. Straight needles with a feather-like shape grow on yew trees. Awl-shaped and scale-like needles are found on juniper and cedar trees."

Conifer branches and cones are also prized for their utility as fabulous Christmas and winter decorations. If you have these trees and shrubs in your garden you will be able to bring in and make wonderful wreaths, table centerpieces, and outdoor containers. The possibilities can be as imaginative as your garden.