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Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*)

Nebraska Forest Service

Douglas fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) is one of the most important timber trees in the United States. It is harvested for a wide variety of uses and is the backbone of the western timber industry. The wood has great strength and yet it is not a very heavy. That has made it most valuable as a raw material for all types of construction. In addition to being an important timber tree, Douglas fir is also a very popular tree for landscape planting and even for windbreaks. The tree is named for David Douglas, a 19th century Scottish botanist and one of the “fathers” of British forestry. In 1939 it was designated the state tree of Oregon. The scientific name (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*) translates as “false hemlock” (*Pseudotsuga*) and after Archibald Menzies, an 18th century botanist who collected plants in western North America.



Douglas fir is not a “true” fir like white fir or balsam fir. It is in fact a species unto itself and is totally unique.

In its natural range, Douglas fir can attain heights of over 300 feet and diameters of 15 feet or more. The national champion is 42 feet in circumference and 281 feet tall located in Olympic National Park in the state of Washington.

Douglas fir is used frequently as a Christmas tree because of its lovely color and shape. It is native from Central British Columbia south along the Pacific coast to central California, central Mexico and also the Rocky Mountains to Arizona and Texas. It can be grown in most parts of Nebraska and Iowa. It prefers a well-drained soil and it will also do much better if it is planted in groups of at least three trees.



Douglas fir, like some of the other spruce and fir species, can be susceptible to wind throw and that is a negative in the prairie states. Some texts will say it does not adapt well out of its range but don't let that discourage you. There are many good specimens in Nebraska.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Douglas fir is the cone. It is similar to a spruce cone except that it has three pronged bracts that extend from under the scales. If you use your imagination just a little bit it resembles the tail and back feet of a mouse. Some say it looks like a snake's tongue with three instead of two prongs. It is the only cone that has this characteristic. While the tree has its share of insect and disease enemies in its natural range, it is relatively pest free in this part of the

country although long periods of drought can be a problem.

In its early years Douglas fir has a nice tight pyramidal shape but as the tree matures it will assume a more open graceful appearance. It has a very nice blue green color and is often mistaken as a Colorado spruce from a distance.