

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



December 2, 2015

Thanksgiving week has come and gone for 2015. And while the turkey, cranberries, and pumpkin pie have all disappeared, at least at our house, hopefully the spirit of Thanksgiving will linger throughout the last days of 2015 and into the New Year. Now, for most of us, it's time to get serious about Christmas week. How do you prepare for Christmas at your house?

For many of us, the holidays wouldn't be the same without a Christmas tree, complete with lights, tinsel, and presents, of course. And while our Christmas tree tradition probably dates from 15th Century Germany, ancient Egyptian, Chinese, and Hebrew cultures also used evergreen trees, wreaths, and garlands to symbolize eternal life. While many people prefer the convenience of an artificial tree, for our family Christmas wouldn't be the same without a fresh evergreen tree.

Most evergreens are conifers, the first seed bearing plants that appeared on Earth 350 million years ago. Today 8 families, 68 genre, and 630 living species of conifers still grow and thrive around the world, including the perfect tree for your living room this holiday season.

Many people choose a pine, fir, or spruce, members of the family Pinaceae, or a cedar from the family Cupressaceae. Balsam and Fraser firs are always popular with their dark green and long-lasting needles, good form, and fragrant scent. Spruces, such as the European Norway or native Black Hills, have good color but poor needle retention. The name Black Hills fittingly comes from the Lakota *Pahá Sápa* and translates "island of trees in a sea of grass." Pines, including white and Scotch, are the most common commercially grown Christmas tree. They have good color and needle retention but little aroma, a good thing for those with allergic reactions. While not as popular today as in years past, the Eastern Red Cedar will also fulfill the need and tree stand.

If you're interested in learning how to identify evergreen species, I encourage you to attend our annual Come & Go Wreath Classes on Monday, December 14, from 4:00 to 8:00 p.m. or Tuesday, December 15, from 9:00 a.m. to noon. The class and supplies are free of charge but registration is appreciated. We'll meet at the Nature Center where there will be evergreen boughs and grapevine for wreath or swag making, dogwood twigs for star making, and "tree cookies" for ornament making.

Another good place to learn more about conifers is the 2016 Tree & Shrub Sale now on our web-site at www.pocahontas-county.com/conservation. This year's plant list includes 6 conifers, 12 shrubs, 12 fruit trees, and 31 shade trees. Call 712-335-4395 or email conservation@pocahontas-county.com soon for best selection.

Conservation staff are also anticipating the approaching Emerald Ash Borer and the discouraging deforestation of our county's many ash trees. During this busy season, as we look forward to Christmas, I encourage everyone to also search and find room for a fir, spruce, pine, or cedar tree in your spring tree planting plans.

