



BALSAM FIR *Abies balsamea* (L.) P. Mill.



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Balsam fir occurs statewide and is the most abundant tree in the state. It is frequently found in damp woods and on well-drained hillsides, and often occurs in thickets. The tree normally forms a sharp spire to a height of 60–70 feet and grows to 12–20 inches in diameter. On young trees, the branches are horizontal, slender, and produced in regular whorls to form a strikingly symmetrical crown. In old age, the top is often slim, regular and spire-like.

The **bark** on young trees is pale gray, smooth, thin and has prominent blisters that are filled with a resinous liquid known as “Canada balsam.” On old trees the bark gets rougher and blisters are absent.

The aromatic **leaves** are about 1 inch long, dark green, and shiny above with 2 rows of white stomata below. The tips are occasionally notched. On branches in full sun, leaves turn up, but on lower branches they spread out at right angles to the branch, giving it a flattened appearance.

MAINE REGISTER OF
BIG TREES 2008

Balsam Fir

Circumference: 78"

Height: 104'

Crown Spread: 23'

Location: T4 R3 WELS





Like all true firs, balsam fir cones point upward and disintegrate when they are mature.



The **cones** are 2–4 inches long, erect and dark purple before maturity. Cones ripen in August and September of the first year, and disintegrate shortly thereafter, leaving only the central spike-like stalks. The twigs are smooth after the leaves have shed. Winter buds are covered with clear resin.

The **wood** is soft, light and moderately limber. It is sawed into dimension lumber chiefly for light and medium building construction, and is used extensively for pulp. Balsam fir is favored for Christmas trees and greens. Each fall many tons of branch tips are collected for making Christmas wreaths. In the past, the branches were steamed in a retort to produce oil of balsam. Also, the clear pitch formed in the blisters of relatively young bark was used to mount microscope slides and to attach theatrical costumes to bare skin.

The smooth bark with resin blisters distinguishes balsam fir from the rest of our conifers.

