

Aromatic Delight: Balsam Fir

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The scent of balsam fir always brings back years of memories of walking the woods with family to select the perfect tree for decorating and branch tips for making wreaths and garlands. Balsam are beautiful trees with dark green short needles (the leaves) and a wonderfully pleasant aroma. They may grow to a height of 60-70 feet but most of us think of them at about six feet in height because they are the most popular holiday tree in New England. Visit a [Maritime Spruce – Fir Forest](#) to see balsam fir in all their natural splendor. [Cutler Coast Public Lands](#) and [Quoddy Head State Park](#) are two locations that host this natural community.



Once the holiday season is over and you can recycle your tree into balsam pillows by stripping and saving the needles. Several sizes of pillows are traditional. Small 3x3-inch pillows for drawer and closet sachets to lightly scent clothing while repelling mice and moths. Larger balsam pillows are made for inserting into bed pillows to promote sleep, and clear congestion during colds.

While you are stripping the needles for pillows take a close look at the undersides. Look for the two white stripes. These are two rows of stomata – the small pores that open and close to control the rate of gas exchange (carbon dioxide and oxygen) and the associated moisture, with the surrounding air.



Interesting Facts

- Balsam fir is the most abundant tree in Maine.
- Cones point upwards. They ripen in by the beginning of September then disintegrate – the cone scales fall off leaving only the central spine or stalk of the cone.
- Pitch from the balsam can be used as a natural semi-permanent glue. Pitch blisters were also traditionally chewed raw as a cleansing gum.
- Essential oil from balsam needles is used traditionally as an anti-bacterial and anti-inflammatory.

Activities for Children & the Young at Heart

1. [Read the Forest Trees of Maine page about balsam fir](#) to learn more about this remarkable tree. [Read about all the trees featured in the Forest Trees of Maine.](#)
2. Make a balsam pillow. Gather a needle, thread, scissors and scraps of cloth and cut two 3-1/2 x 3-1/2-inch squares for each pillow. Match two squares together so that the patterned sides face each other. Sew each of three sides together knotting the thread at starting point, midway and at end of side. On the fourth side only sew halfway. Turn the open edge of half-sewn side back on itself to turn the pillow right side out. Fill with balsam needles, leaving room enough to easily sew the open section closed. OR make a balsam drawstring bag by not sewing the fourth side but sewing back an open hem then inserting an old shoelace, string, yarn or strip of cloth for the drawstring.

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