How to Identify Trees on Mount Monadnock

A trail guide to bark, leaves, needles, and shape

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Photo credit: Jonwmcinenry https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Monadnock

Begin with the big clues

Tree identification is easier when you slow down and check several clues instead of trusting one.

First decide whether the tree has broad leaves or needles. Then study how the leaves or needles attach, the texture of the bark, the branching pattern, and any cones or seeds on the ground. Elevation helps too: Monadnock's lower slopes support mixed northern hardwoods, while red spruce becomes more noticeable higher on the mountain. Near the open summit, wind and thin soil keep many trees short and twisted.

Two easy trees to learn first

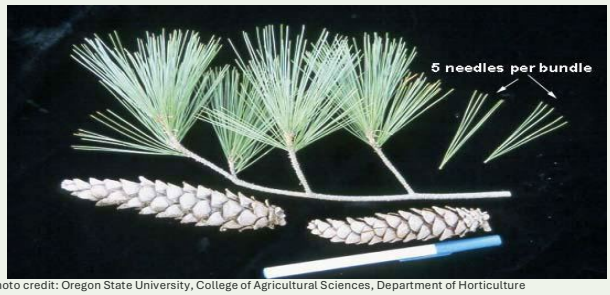


Photo credit: Oregon State University, College of Agricultural Sciences, Department of Horticulture

Eastern white pine

Count the needles. White pine carries soft, flexible needles in bundles of five. A helpful memory trick is that WHITE has five letters. Mature bark becomes dark gray and deeply furrowed, and the cones are long and slender.



Photo credit: Milwaukee Public Museum

Paper birch

Look for bright white bark with dark horizontal marks. Older bark peels in thin, papery curls, while younger branches are reddish brown. The leaves are oval to triangular with sharply toothed edges.

Trail tip: Observe living trees without peeling bark or breaking branches; use fallen leaves, cones, and twigs for close inspection.

Tell spruce from fir

The quickest test is texture. Red spruce needles are short, stiff, and four-sided, so one rolls easily between your fingers. Each grows from a tiny woody peg, making a bare spruce twig feel rough. Balsam fir needles are flatter and softer, usually forming two tidy rows. They attach smoothly, and a crushed fallen needle often has a strong evergreen scent.



Photo credit: American Conifer Society, Conifer Trees Database, Picea rubens

Red spruce needles surround the twig and sit on small woody pegs.

Photo credit: Peter M. Dziuk

Recognize the common hardwoods



Red maple has opposite leaves and branches, meaning they grow in pairs across from each other. Its leaves usually have three to five shallow lobes and toothed edges. Red stems, buds, flowers, or fall color may provide extra clues, but color alone is not reliable. Red maple leaves are often the first to change their color to a deep red as fall approaches.

American beech has smooth, pale gray bark, long oval leaves with straight side veins, and thin pointed winter buds. The leaves of the American beech have an easily identifiable, serrated, sawtooth pattern.



Photo Credit: Adirondacks Forever Wild, Trees of the Adirondacks

Use a repeatable field routine

On your next hike, try this four-step routine: identify broadleaf or conifer; check whether leaves or branches are opposite or alternate; inspect bark without damaging it; and confirm your guess with a second clue such as buds, cones, or habitat. Photograph the whole tree and one close-up. With

practice, you will find yourself searching the canopy above on your next hike instead of staring at the ground!

The Discover the Power of Parks Program is a collaboration between the New Hampshire Department of Natural and Cultural Resources – Division of Parks and Recreation, Student Conservation Association's New Hampshire Conservation Corps, AmeriCorps, and Volunteer NH.