

## Preparing and Using Pine Cones For Decoration

While you are outside enjoying the cool winter days, you may notice that many evergreens have attractive pine cones that you could use to decorate your home during the holiday season.

Pine trees such as eastern white pine, ponderosa pine, Scotch pine and Austrian pine all have nice sized cones that are two to eight inches long. Spruce, hemlock, larch and Douglas-fir also have attractive, smaller cones.

Pine cones used for holiday decorations can bring unwanted insects into your home. Dirty cones can also make a sticky mess if not cleaned before using them. To prepare cones for use as decorations follow these

simple guidelines. Fill an old pail half full with hot water. Add a cup of chlorine bleach and enough laundry soap to make light suds. Drop in the cones, a dozen at a time, then stir the solution and cones for a few minutes. Do not use your bare hands because a strong chlorine bleach solution will cause skin irritation. Washing the cones in this solution removes resin, dust and insects. Lift out the cones and rinse in clean water. Do not let the cones soak in water because they will darken.

Use the pine cones to decorate your home, wreaths and floral arrangements. After the holidays store them away for next year. (MJF)

## Forcing Spring-Flowering Bulbs

Spring-flowering bulbs, such as tulips, daffodils, and crocuses, herald the arrival of spring in the Midwest. Many spring-flowering bulbs can also be forced indoors during the winter months. If properly planned, brightly colored flowers may be enjoyed indoors from January until spring.

The forcing of spring-flowering bulbs actually begins in the fall. Gardeners need good quality bulbs, a well-drained potting mix, containers and cold-storage facilities.

Spring-flowering bulbs which can be forced include tulips, daffodils, hyacinths and crocuses. While most bulb varieties can be forced, best results are obtained by selecting varieties which are recommended for forcing. Select large, firm bulbs. Small bulbs may bloom poorly, if at all.

Commercial potting mixes can be purchased at garden centers and nurseries. Choose a high quality potting mix that drains well. Gardeners can also prepare their own medium by mixing equal parts soil, peat and perlite.

Bulbs can be forced in plastic, clay or ceramic containers. Almost any container can be used as long as it has drainage



holes in the bottom. If the containers have been used previously, wash them in soapy water and then rinse in a 1 to 9 solution of chlorine bleach and water.

### Forcing Procedure

1. Partially fill the container with potting mix
2. Place the bulbs in the pot so that the tip of each bulb is even or slightly below the rim of the container. The bulbs should be planted closely together. For example, six tulip bulbs or 12 to 15 crocuses can be planted in a 6-inch diameter pot.
3. Add additional potting mix and firm it around the bulbs. However, do not cover the entire bulb. Allow the top of

the bulb to stick above the soil surface. The soil level should be 1/2 to 1 inch below the rim of the container.

4. Label each container as it is planted. Include the name of the variety and planting date.

5. Water each container thoroughly.

6. Place the bulbs in cold storage for a period of 12 to 16 weeks at a temperature of 40 to 45° F. A refrigerator, cold frame or root cellar are possible storage sites. The bulbs should be kept in complete darkness during the cold treatment. Periodically water the bulbs during cold storage.

7. Once the cold requirement has been met, the containers can be removed from cold storage. Place the bulbs in a cool (55 to 60° F), semi-light location. Keep the potting soil evenly moist throughout the forcing period. Move the pots to a slightly warmer area which receives direct sunlight when the shoots begin to grow. As the plants grow, turn the pots periodically to prevent the plants from leaning.
8. Flowering should occur in 3 to 4 weeks.
9. For a succession of bloom, remove pots from cold storage at 10 to 14 day intervals. (MJF)

## Garden Guide

### Things to do this month

Inspect trees and shrubs for bagworm capsules. Remove and destroy them to reduce next year's pest population.

Be sure not to store apples or pears with vegetables. The fruits give off ethylene gas which speeds up the breakdown of vegetables and will cause them to develop off-flavors.

After the ground freezes, mulch small fruit plants such as strawberries. One inch of straw or leaves is ideal for strawberries. Small branches may be used to keep mulch in place.

Remove all mummified fruit from fruit trees and rake up and destroy those on the ground. Also, rake and dispose of apple and cherry leaves. Good sanitation practices reduce reinfestation of insects and diseases the following season.

African violets do well when potted in small pots. A good general rule is to use a pot one-third the diameter of the plant. Encourage African violets to bloom by giving them plenty of light. They can be in a south window during dark winter months. They bloom beautifully under fluorescent lights. In fact, they seem to prefer them.

Clean power tools of all plant material and dirt. Replace worn spark plugs, oil all necessary parts, and sharpen blades. Store all tools in their proper place indoors, never outdoors where they will rust over the winter.

Clean and fix all hand tools. Repaint handles or identification marks that have faded over the summer. Sharpen all blades and remove any rust.

Order seed catalogs now for garden planning in January. For variety, consider companies that specialize in old and rare varieties or wild flowers.

Bring out the bird feeders and stock them with bird seed for the birds. Remember to provide fresh water for them too.

Place Christmas trees away from fireplaces, radiators, heat vents and anything else that could dry the needles. Keep your Christmas tree well watered from the time it is brought home until it is discarded.

Minimize traffic on a frozen lawn to reduce winter damage.

House plants with large leaves and smooth foliage such as philodendrons, dracaena and rubber plant, benefit if their leaves are washed with a damp cloth to remove dust.

A home weather station that includes a minimum-maximum thermometer, a rain gauge and a weather log is a good gift for a gardener.

Start reviewing your garden notes to help with next year's plans.

Check fruits, vegetables, corms and tubers that you have in storage. Sort out any that show signs of rot and dispose of them. (MJF)

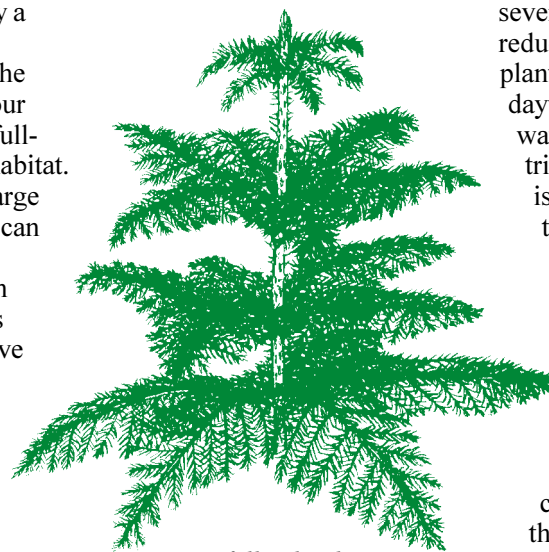
## Choosing and Caring for Indoor Trees

A houseplant is usually a small, well-kept foliage or flowering plant sitting on the windowsill. But many of our common houseplants are full-scale trees in their native habitat.

If space is available, large specimens of these plants can be used as indoor trees. Specialty plant stores often have access to large plants that can be used as effective room accents. Or you might consider growing your own.

The date palm can grow up to 100 feet outdoors, but a five foot specimen is ideal for indoors. Plants set on a pedestal have a definite tree effect. For optimum growth, place them near any sunny east, south or west window, or add supplemental light. Room temperatures between 62 and 75° F and moderate humidity are ideal. When old fronds turn yellow, remove them at the trunk with a sharp pruning tool to maintain an attractive stem.

There are several types of Ficus that can provide a wide variety of large specimen plants that quickly grow into tree form. The fiddle leaf fig produces leathery, deep green leaves about 15 inches long, with crinkled margins on stout stems. The common rubber tree produces slightly smaller, six to 11 inch leaves that are bright olive-green with a touch of red along their straight margin. Well branched



Norfolk Island pine

specimens of either plant form trees with little effort. Both the fiddle leaf fig and rubber plant respond well to bright sunny locations, and often drop foliage if light levels drop. Supplemental artificial light will help maintain foliage quality, as will uniform soil moisture. As with the palms, temperatures of 62 to 75° F and moderate humidity are helpful.

The weeping fig, another Ficus, probably has the greatest potential for becoming a satisfactory indoor tree. As the plant matures it branches freely and develops a spreading, tree-like form similar to outdoor landscape trees. Rapid changes in a weeping fig's environment often causes severe leaf drop. Some leaf drop is normal after the plant is brought home. The

severity of the drop can be reduced by making certain the plant receives plenty of bright daytime light and adequate water. Rapid changes also may trigger leaf drop after the plant is established, so it is important to be consistent in your treatment of the plant.

Washing foliage regularly with a damp cloth will maintain good plant health.

Citrus plants (orange, lemon and grapefruit) are seven to eight feet tall and create tree-like shapes as they branch freely to develop a full crown of foliage. Their waxy, bright green leaves are several inches long and remain on the plants all year. Under the right cultural conditions these plants may produce creamy white, sweet-scented flowers and colorful, edible fruit. Like all flowering plants, citrus need plenty of sun, so putting them in an eastern or southern window works well. They need to be kept warm in the winter with temperatures between 62 and 72° F.

If you have a vacant corner or bare wall, consider one of these large foliage plants to add color, variety and interest during the year. When summer arrives, these indoor trees can be moved to your outdoor living space, where they will benefit from the additional light and humidity while you enjoy their color and beauty. (MJF)