

BALSAM FIR

Abies balsamea (L.) Mill.

Balsam fir occurs statewide and is the most abundant conifer in the state. It is frequent in damp woods, and on well drained hillsides, often occurring 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 which are filled with a resinous liquid known as "Canada balsam". On old trees the bark gets slightly rougher.

The aromatic **leaves** are about one inch long, prone to pitch, dark green and shiny above, silvery white below, and with the tips occasionally notched. On top branches leaves turn up, but on lower branches they spread out at right angles to the branch,



giving it a flattened appearance. The **cones** are 2 - 4 inches long, erect and dark purple in color before maturity. Cones ripen in August and September of the first year, 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 in a large degree for pulp. Balsam fir is favored for Christmas trees and greens. Small trees are cut in great numbers primarily for the northeastern Christmas tree market. The branches can be steamed in a retort to produce oil of balsam. In the past, 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.