

### red spruce (*Picea rubens*)



Red spruce is a medium sized conifer native to eastern North America. Wildlife are very happy this tree exists and couldn't live without it. Red spruce's low-hanging boughs provide important winter habitat for moose, deer and other species seeking shelter from deep winter snows. As the tree's cones open in the fall, squirrels and birds (white-winged crossbills, black-throated green warblers and pileated woodpeckers) rely on the seeds to stock up for winter months.

If you look at its needles closely, you will see that they are four-sided and curved on woody pegs. The needles of red spruce grow individually on these hairy twigs. If you touch them, watch out - they are sharp-pointed and prickly. When you crush them, they exude a fruity scent similar to a crushed orange rind, while the white spruce needles smell like skunk or cat urine.

The male and female flower buds open in May. The pendant male flowers are bright red, a contrast to the erect female flowers that are bright green tinged with purple. Mature trees produce small, dark brown cones with an oval shape and loose, widely spread scales. The bark of red spruce is reddish brown in colour and separates into scales or plates as it ages. This handsome tree likes to grow in moist well-drained soil and thrives at higher elevations.

But these days red spruce is not thriving. The red spruce has low genetic diversity as well as a narrow ecological niche. This makes the tree easily susceptible to changes within its environment - from excessive logging, pollution, climate change, and insect damage.

First Nations used its needles as a remedy for throat ailments and lung trouble and as a beverage too. The gum was used for pitch and the peeled roots for lacing. Red spruce is also the preferred wood for piano sounding boards, guitars, mandolins, organ pipes and violin bellies. Its wood is light in colour and weight, straight grained and resilient. A tree that gives both

medicine and music is one you don't want to see on the decline. But the wildlife haven't given up on red spruce and neither have we.



*The pictures were taken in bed 81C of the BC Habitat Garden in December.*

<https://gobotany.nativeplanttrust.org/species/picea/rubens/>

<https://knowlesvillenature.ca/2023/04/05/spruce-up-your-native-tree-knowlege-red-spruce/>

<https://www.natureconservancy.ca/en/what-we-do/resource-centre/featured-species/plants/red-spruce.html>

<http://www.nativetech.org/plantgath/spruce.htm>

