

The Ponderosa Pine (*Pinaceae Pinus ponderosa*)

Pinus ponderosa, Western Yellow Pine, Bull, Black Jack, Western Red, Sierra Brownbark, Heavy, Western Pitch, Ponderosa Pine. Montana's state tree has a long list of names. This stately western Montana resident has figured heavily in the development of all the West. In what is now South Dakota, Lewis and Clark first observed the cones of the ponderosa pine which had floated that far on the currents of the Missouri River. Captain Lewis, particularly, took extensive notes on the tree as he passed through its habitat later during the journey west and back.



Pioneers used the pine's wood for the civilization they were building. Ponderosa timber served everywhere, from railroad ties and telegraph poles to mine bracing and homes. Only later did its long needles and attractive cones garner more scientific consideration.



In the spring of 1908, Helena's school children held a referendum on which tree best represented the state. The ponderosa easily outdistanced fir, larch, and cottonwood for the designation. It was not until 1949, however, that the Montana Legislature bestowed its blessing. **The Montana Federation of Garden Clubs** carried on a year-long campaign on behalf of the ponderosa. The state forester supported it as the "most typical" of all Montana trees and the best commercial timber... "king of the forest," he called it. The Legislature agreed. The beauty and value of the ponderosa pine makes it truly representative of Montana and worthy of its designation as the state tree.

Montana's lumbermen have harvested millions of board feet from public and private lands throughout the state. In a recent year, the value of ponderosa pine harvested from public land alone was more than four million dollars. A major source of timber, ponderosa pine forests are also important as wildlife habitat, for recreational use and for esthetic values.

Today the tree may be found in most parts of western Montana. Its range includes the entire West, from the plains to the Pacific Coast. On the average the tree reaches maturity when 60 to 125 feet tall (about 150 years old) and approximately 20 to 30 inches in diameter. The largest ponderosa pine on record live along the humid Pacific coast, where California naturalist John Muir once measured a giant, 220 feet tall and eight feet in diameter. Ponderosa pines grow straight and tall, sometimes more than two hundred feet. Within its extensive range, two varieties of the species currently are recognized: *Pinus ponderosa* var. *ponderosa* (Pacific ponderosa pine) (typical) and var. *scopulorum* (Rocky Mountain ponderosa pine). Arizona pine (*P. arizonica*), sometimes classified as a variety of ponderosa pine, is presently recognized as a separate species.

- Leaf: Evergreen, 5 to 10 inches long, with three (sometimes 2) tough, yellow-green needles per fascicle. When crushed, needles have a turpentine odor sometimes reminiscent of citrus.
- Flower: Monoecious; males yellow-red, cylindrical, in clusters near ends of branches; females reddish at branch tips.
- Fruit: Cones are ovoid, 3 to 6 inches long, sessile, red-brown in color, armed with a slender prickle. Maturing August to September.
- Twig: Stout, orange in color, turning black. Buds often covered with resin.
- Bark: Very dark (nearly black) on young trees, developing cinnamon-colored plates and deep furrows.
- Form: A large tree with an irregular crown, eventually developing a flat top or short conical crown. Ponderosa pine self-prunes well.