

Tree ID With Your Child

As the leaves fall away and the woods feel brighter, this is a wonderful time of year to start identifying trees with your child. Now you might argue, “but I don’t know a **THING** about tree species” which makes you the perfect and fun teacher for the job.

Just pick one. Toss out the notion that you’re going to mold a short taxonomist who returns home able to classify 30 species. Start with one kind of tree that you notice on a walk and then find it, like a treasure hunt, again and again. Pretty soon on your walks, you two will start to see a pattern of where that particular tree likes to hang out and with what sort of friends. Maybe it prefers moist sites beside streams alongside hemlocks, or perhaps it appears beside the higher, dry, rocky part of walking trails. It might even be a popular urban tree choice that thrives between sidewalks and curbs.

Then pick another one. On the next walk you’ll be up to two species.

These days, you can google anything but here is one easy example for starting:

white pine: It’s fluffy and soft-looking and you have to admire anybody that keeps the same, dependable appearance whether it’s January or July. Years ago in my dendrology class, a rugged, flannel-shirted forestry classmate remarked, “its the only pine tree you can hug.” Huggability may be subjective, but this is not: the white pine has 5 needles bunched together in each “fascicle.” Go ahead, nip a tiny twig from a lower branch or off the ground and count them; you’ll find 5 needles every time.



In future, you may even find yourself having to resist a smile when you hear people carelessly interchange “spruces”, “pines”, and “firs.” It’s a peril of learning dendrology. My daughter reminds me that I’m no picnic to go Christmas tree shopping with. But today, just celebrate that you helped a youngster stop and really look at a white pine. Enjoy.

