Common Seattle Trees

Three common maples found in Seattle are shown on this page. Two are native species and are described below. The following applies to all maples.

Deciduous trees or shrubs
Deciduous - Opposite - Simple
Palmate leaves always opposite on the branch; lobed to various degrees
Always paired, winged seeds; called ‘helicopters’ by children for the way each half of the pair spins to the ground when dropped
Small and non-showy, usually in clusters: dark red (Japanese and Red) or yellow-green (Norway)

Bigleaf Maple
Acer macrophyllum

Form
30-100 feet; can have several main trunks; massive, spreading crown
Deciduous - Opposite - Simple
Palmate; 3-5 deep lobes; enormous; 8-14” in length and width

Leaves
Green when young; dark gray-brown, deeply furrowed, with mosses and ferns growing abundantly when older

Bark
Greenish-yellow and tiny (1/4”); hanging in elongated clusters

Flower
Pairs of winged seeds; coarsely hairy at acute angled juncture

Fruit
Produce ‘canopy roots’ which harvest nutrients from the moss and debris which collect in the branches. Native.

Vine Maple
Acer circinatum

Form
Up to 30 feet; spreading, multi-stemmed shrub
Deciduous - Opposite - Simple
Palmate; 7-9 pointed lobes; serrated edges; a little larger than your palm; 4 3/4” in length and width

Leaves
Gray-brown; smooth

Bark
Small and white (1/4”); maroon sepals underneath; hanging in clusters

Flower
Pairs of smooth winged seeds joined at an obtuse angle; to 1 1/4” long

Fruit
Called circinatum to indicate the circles formed when tall branches bend to the ground and sprout roots.

Red Maple
Acer rubrum

Form
Threshold: 2’ 6”

Leaves
Deciduous - Opposite - Simple
Palmate Leaves opposite branching

Bark
Threshold: 8”

Fruit
Pairs of smooth winged seeds joined at an obtuse angle; to 1 1/4” long

Tree Tip
Called circinatum to indicate the circles formed when tall branches bend to the ground and sprout roots.
**LONDON PLANE TREE** *Platanus x acerifolia*

**Threshold:** 2' 6"

- **Form**: 70-100 feet; straight clear trunk; pyramidal crown becomes very large, open and wide spreading at maturity
- **Leaves**: Deciduous · Alternate · Simple
  - Palmate: 3-5 shallow lobes; leaf edge coarsely toothed: to 10” wide and 8” long; dark green above, pale beneath
- **Bark**: Mottled gray, olive green, and cream; flaking off in plates
- **Flower**: Tiny; grouped separately in small round clusters; males yellow, females reddish
- **Fruit**: Globed shaped multiple fruit; usually 2 per stalk
- **Tree Tip**: Can be confused at first with maples, or sweet gum. Also known as Sycamore.

**PACIFIC DOGWOOD** *Cornus Nuttallii*

**Threshold:** 6"

- **Form**: 10-40 feet; small trees or shrubs; branches often appearing to grow in horizontal layers
- **Leaves**: Deciduous · Opposite · Simple
  - Leaves oval with acutely pointed tips; veins parallel and curving to follow the smooth leaf edge
- **Bark**: Smooth except at base
- **Flower**: True flowers tiny, greenish yellow, and in clusters surrounded by 4-6 white to pale pink petal-like bracts
- **Fruit**: Bright red oval fruits (3/8” long) in dense clusters

**PAPER BIRCH** *Betula papyrifera*

**Threshold:** 1' 8"

- **Form**: 40-60 feet (European White Birch) or up to 80 feet (Paper Birch); can have several trunks; crown open and rounded
- **Leaves**: Deciduous · Alternate · Simple
  - Pointed with round base; doubly serrate edge: 2-3” long (Paper) or 1-2” (Euro.)
- **Bark**: White: easily peeling in papery strips (Paper) or cracking to show dark furrows between white ridges (Euro.)
- **Flower**: Tiny flowers in two kinds of catkins: catkin green and shorter; yellow, longer
- **Fruit**: Fat green catkins of tiny winged nutlets
- **Tree Tip**: The native species in this pair, Paper Birch, was used in baskets and canoes.

**WHITE BIRCH** *Betula pendula*

**Threshold:** 2’

- **Form**: 40-60 feet (European White Birch) or up to 80 feet (Paper Birch); can have several trunks; crown open and rounded
- **Leaves**: Deciduous · Alternate · Simple
  - Pointed with round base; doubly serrate edge: 2-3” long (Paper) or 1-2” (Euro.)
- **Bark**: White: easily peeling in papery strips (Paper) or cracking to show dark furrows between white ridges (Euro.)
- **Flower**: Tiny flowers in two kinds of catkins: catkin green and shorter; yellow, longer
- **Fruit**: Fat green catkins of tiny winged nutlets
- **Tree Tip**: The native species in this pair, Paper Birch, was used in baskets and canoes.

**AMERICAN SWEETGUM** *Liquidambar styraciflua*

**Threshold:** 2' 3"

- **Form**: 60-75 feet; clear, straight trunk; crown pyramidal early in life, rounded later
- **Leaves**: Deciduous · Alternate · Simple
  - Star-shaped: 5-7 pointed, deep lobes; edges finely serrated: 4-6” in length and width
- **Bark**: Gray-brown; thick; deeply furrowed with rounded ridges
- **Flower**: Yellow-green; tiny; in clusters
- **Fruit**: Prickly sphere the size of a cherry tomato (1-1 1/2” in diameter); one per stalk; composed of many beaked, seedbearing capsules
- **Tree Tip**: Seen along many of Seattle’s streets. Do not confuse with London Plane Tree.
## OAKS

**Form**

Trees and shrubs of a wide variety. The family is divided into 2 groups: red oaks and white oaks. Forms can be similar or different depending on age.

**Leaves**

Deciduous · Alternate · Simple
Red oaks: pointed bristle-tipped lobes; White oaks: rounded lobes

**Bark**

Dark gray-brown; furrowed or scaly

**Flower**

Tiny, yellow: occurring in short, catkinlike clusters

**Fruit**

Acorn: inside of shell hairy (Red Oaks) or not hairy (White Oaks)

**Tree Tip**

Though oaks are deciduous, the leaves stay on the branches through winter and give trees a dead appearance.

---

## CONIFERS

The conifers are set apart from the broadleaves by having a different kind of seed. Conifers get their name because for most species, their seeds are found in cones. There are a few species whose cones look more like fruits, however. Most conifers keep their needle-like leaves year-round, though there are few which drop them each fall.

---

## DOUGLAS FIR

**Form**

100-250 feet: older branches breaking off to leave lower trunk clear; open, spire-like crown

**Leaves**

Evergreen · Single Needles
1 1/4” flat needles; pointed tip; having a petiole

**Bark**

Dark brown-almost purplish; heavily furrowed

**Cone**

Distinctive pendant cone with 3-pronged bracts (mouse tails and feet as the story goes) extending out underneath each scale; 4” long

**Tree Tip**

Very common native. You can tell it is not a true fir because of the raised scars left on the twigs, the petioles of the needles, and the pendant cones.

---

## DEODAR CEDAR

**Form**

40-70+ feet: broadly pyramidal, spreading and flat-topped with age; graceful pendulous branches

**Leaves**

Evergreen · Bundled Needles in whorls of 15-20; 1-2” long; widely spaced on branches

**Bark**

Dark brown to gray; tightly scaled and fissured

**Cone**

Upright 3-5” barrel shaped; solitary or in pairs;

**Tree Tip**

Develops large lateral branches with widely spaced needle clusters that create an open airy profile; a true cedar from the Himalayas of India.

---

## WESTERN RED CEDAR

**Form**

150-200 feet: broadly pyramidal; trunk buttressed at base; lower branches drooping and J-shaped

**Leaves**

Evergreen · Scales
Foliage in flat sprays “fronds”; leaves are tiny scales 1/4” long; overlapping to make a braided pattern

**Bark**

Silvery gray outer bark; reddish inner bark; very fibrous

**Cone**

Egg-shaped and woody; having 10 scales; sitting upright on twig; 1/2” long

**Tree Tip**

Another very important Northwest native. The bark and wood are fragrant and rot-resistant; the bark can be made into rope; the wood is both a traditional and modern building material.
**Western Hemlock** *Tsuga heterophylla*

**Form**
- 125-175 feet; pyramidal with a conspicuously drooping top; sweeping, feathery, branches to ground when open grown

**Leaves**
- Evergreen · Single Needles
- Needles are different lengths; extending horizontally from twig

**Bark**
- Gray-brown and scaly

**Cone**
- Diminutive cones for such a big tree: 3/4" in length; always pendant

**Tree Tip**
- Hemlocks are an important native species which indicate a healthy, mature forest. The scientific name is fitting: *Tsuga* means hemlock and *heterophylla* means “different leaves”.

---

**Pine Family** *Pinus species*

**Form**
- Conifers of various heights; branches arranged around a straight trunk like a bottle brush · “whorled branching”

**Leaves**
- Evergreen · Bundled Needles
- Needles are bundled together in fascicles of 1-5; needle number and length are shown for 4 species commonly found in Seattle

**Cone**
- Cones have hard woody scales and vary in shape and size (noted at right). They are usually hanging down off the branch.

**Tree Tip**
- You will need to use a combination of several of the above features to make a positive identification. You can see that Scotch pine and Lodgepole Pine could easily be confused.

---

**Glossary**

- **Alternate** leaves arranged singly along stem; not opposite
- **Blade** the broad portion of a leaf
- **Canopy** the uppermost layer of foliage in a forest of a single tree
- **Compound leaf** a leaf composed of several leaflets; a leaf whose blade is completely divided into several leaflets
- **Crown** the upper part of the tree, all of its branches and leaves together; similar to canopy
- **Deciduous** leaves falling off once a year
- **Drip line** the area around the base of a tree within the outside edge of the crown; also called drip zone
- **Evergreen** leaves staying on year after year
- **Form** height and general shape of the tree
- **Fruit** the seed-bearing structure of the tree
- **Leaf** identified by having a tiny bud hidden between the leaf petiole and the twig
- **Leaflet** one of the small leaf-like structures in a compound leaf; distinguished from a leaf because there is no bud hidden between the leaflet petiole and the axis it is attached to
- **Lobe** a shallow division in a simple leaf
- **Opposite** leaves arranged in pairs along a stem so that 2 leaves are opposite each other
- **Petiole** the stalk of the leaf which attaches it to the twig
- **Shrub** a many-stemmed woody plant, usually less than 30 feet tall
- **Simple Leaf** a leaf whose blade is whole and not completely divided into leaflets
- **Tree** generally a single-stemmed woody plant growing at least 20 feet tall at maturity