# Steppin' Outdoors: Winter Tree ID

Learn to identify trees in the frozen North!



## Grade range

Fun for the whole family!

## Background

Tree identification may seem like a difficult task in winter, but there are many characteristics of trees that are actually easier to see without their leaves! Looking closely at a tree's shape, twigs, buds, and bark can help you be a better friend to your forests.

### Words to know

**Deciduous:** trees that lose their leaves in the fall

**Coniferous:** trees that keep their needles all year long

**Buds:** the small nodes (bumps) along twigs that may develop into a leaf or flower

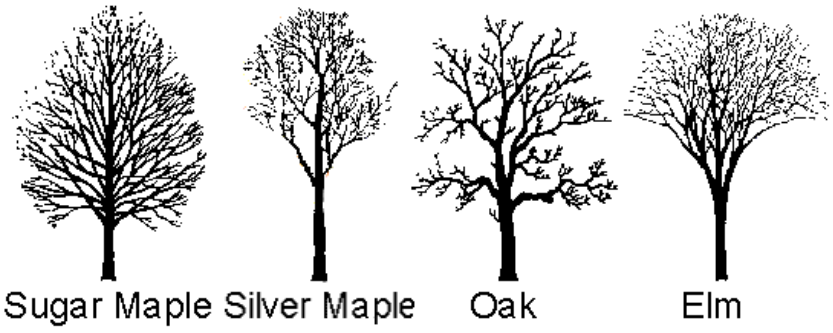
## ID some trees!

### Gather materials

- Trees and your senses!

### Try it out!

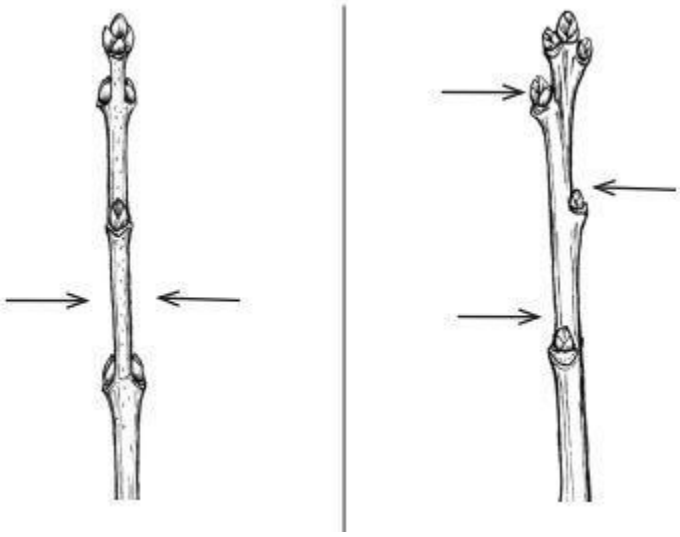
1. Select a tree to identify.
2. Is this tree deciduous or coniferous? Conifers, or "evergreens" have needles instead of leaves and stay green all winter. Deciduous trees lose their leaves in the winter and have bare branches like the picture below. Choose a deciduous



tree to identify.

https://www.lostrivers.ca/content/points/treeswinter.html

3. Notice the shape of the tree. Do branches stretch out horizontally or do they grow upwards? Is the trunk slender or stocky?
4. Walk up to the tree and look at its bark. What do you notice about the color? Texture? Does the bark seem thick or thin? Black walnut trees have very dark brown bark with deep fissures. Yellow birch has golden bark that grows in thin, papery layers. The blue beech has smooth gray bark.
5. Next, get even closer and look at the buds on the tree's twigs. Are the buds arranged opposite (two across from each other) or alternate (one here, one there in a repeating pattern)? Some tree families with alternating leaves include poplar, oak, birch, beech, elm and cherry. Trees with opposite nodes include



https://www.uwsp.edu/cnr-ap/leaf/Documents/LEAFWinterTreeIDKey.pdf

maple and ash.

6. If it is late winter, you may be able to use the characteristics of the buds to identify trees. Oak trees keep their bud ends in little clusters. Ash tree buds are dark brown to black and look like deer hooves. Some poplar buds are fragrant and sticky!

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7. Using the information you've gathered, see if you can identify your tree with the help of one of these resources.
    - Printable tree identification resources from the University of Minnesota:
        - **Tree Identification Cards:** https://trees.umn.edu/sites/trees.umn.edu/files/2021-06/UMN_TreeID_CardSet_2021.pdf
        - **A Beginner's Guide to Minnesota Trees:** https://trees.umn.edu/sites/trees.umn.edu/files/files/general/beginners-guide-minnesota-trees.pdf
    - **Winter Tree ID Key** by University of Wisconsin:
        - https://www.uwsp.edu/cnr-ap/leaf/Documents/LEAFWinterTreeIDKey.pdf
    - Download a tree identification app such as LeafSnap or vTree.

## Think it over

- What was the most interesting thing you observed?
- How did you use your senses to ID the trees?

## Take it further

- Bring paper and crayons along to do bark rubbings.
- Start a nature journal and keep track of the seasonal changes you notice in a tree near your home.

**Sources:**

Beevis-Tricket, C. (2021, December). Beginners guide to winter trees. Nature Conservancy. https://www.natureconservancy.ca/en/blog/beginners-guide-to-winter-tree.html

Minnesota Department of Natural Resources

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*This lesson is part of Steppin' Outdoors Activity Guides.*

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