

December 2014 Plant of the Month



Pinus strobus L. Eastern White Pine

The December *Plant of the Month* is the Eastern White Pine, *Pinus strobus*. Our native white pine has an association with the winter holiday season and traditions as many evergreens do. Although not often used indoors, it is frequently present in the residential landscape and often decorated for the season. It is for this use we highlight eastern white pine of the month of December.

White pine is a five-needle pine native to the northeastern United States. Its branching pattern is whorled, making the species easy to identify. Its long fragile, sap covered cones also provide a simple identifying feature. It occupies well-drained fertile soils from Manitoba to New Foundland south in the Appalachians to Georgia. White pine was once the most valuable tree in the east coast. Ship builders and other woodworker found this species well suited because of its straight trunk and ease of working. It was one of the choice wood types used by New England decoy makers as well. The English early in the colonization of North America selected white pine from New England for ship masts. Many trees carried the brand of the crown, a symbol indicating the tree's dedication for the royal navy's use.

White pine is native in New Jersey. It is the pine most often growing on the more fertile rocky geology counties north of the Coastal Plain. Its distribution on the Coastal Plain is less frequent. Mary Hough (1983) shows the tree is growing in every New Jersey county, but the original distribution is lost to the forest clearing and wholesale landscape manipulation present since colonial times. Records for native populations of the species in southern New Jersey are sparse. It was once a minor part of the Inner Coastal Plain forest. Early botanists identified large specimens in Manahawkin Creek wetlands. FNJP's own Ted Gordon witnessed these trees and told of very large specimens protected by fire and cutting by their remote wetland locations. Ancient trees also occupy forests in Salem, Gloucester and Camden Counties indicating either an original native distribution or very early use as landscape specimens. In contrast, the tree is wholly absent in the Pine Barrens. Unlike the "yellow pines" of pitch and short leaf pines, white pine's bark is thin and unsuited to the fire regime associated with the Southern Pine Barrens.

Only around old home sites or in modern plantings do we find white pine in the Pine Barrens today.

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