



Plant ID tips

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Here are some tips that may help you with plant identification.

Plants are living organisms, not manufactured products. It is natural for two specimens of the same species to vary. You will seldom find a plant that matches a textbook description 100%.

Plants change from season to season. For example, on a tree, buds may form in the summer, but may change color by winter; stems and leaves may be pubescent in spring, but glabrous by summer—hair can be a very fleeting identification character!! The best way to really know a plant is to look at it in all seasons.

Whenever possible, examine more than one branch, leaf, etc. Chances are, if a plant has only one atypical branch or leaf, it will be the first one you examine.

On a tree or shrub, be aware that leaves that develop in the shade may look different than those that develop in the sun. So, it is very possible to find two different leaf shapes on the same tree. Look at leaves that are exposed to sunshine; they are more likely to show the typical characteristics of the tree.

Don't get so busy looking at the trees, that you forget to see the forest. On any plant, not just trees, it's fine to look closely at buds, twigs, etc., but a lot can be deduced by standing back and looking at a plant's size, color and form. Every species of plant has a typical form it will attain as it matures (provided it has enough space to grow).

When you are in the field, consider the habitat in which the plant is growing. The habitat may provide another clue to the identity of the plant. You won't find a cactus growing in a bog. As you walk in a natural area, note that you see different species as you move from a low wet area to a drier upland area.

It can help to turn a flower or inflorescence over and look at the bottom of it. We may be able to see bracts or note that some parts are missing.

On a woody plant, you can tell a leaf from a leaflet by looking for the bud. The bud will always be at the base of the leaf. There will never be a bud at the base of a leaflet. Many trees and shrubs will have their buds for a good part of the year (often mid-summer until the new leaves open).

How can you tell bracts from sepals? Sepals are the lower whorl of structures on the lower side of the flower. Bracts often subtend (are below) an inflorescence, not an individual flower. This does not work 100% of the time as bracts can pop up in a lot of odd places and some flowers lack sepals.