

## LUMBER 411

By Jeff Easterling



A Special Series from  
Northeastern Lumber  
Manufacturers Association

# Balsam fir

IT'S MORE THAN just a favorite candle scent or your favorite Christmas tree species: the balsam fir is one of the most well-known and well-loved wood species in North America. It's also an important resource for lumber manufacturers from the Northeast to the Great Lakes. There are around 56 fir species in the world, but today let's meet our friend *Abies balsamea*.

### What is Balsam Fir?

Balsam fir is a small to medium-sized coniferous tree that grows in a pyramid-like shape and can reach mature heights of between 45 and 65 ft. tall and up to 20 to 25 ft. wide. The species is native to the Northeastern and Great Lakes regions of the U.S., in addition to most of eastern and central Canada. It may be found from Minnesota east to Maine, and south through the Appalachians into West Virginia. In Canada, it extends from Newfoundland and Labrador west through the more northerly portions of Quebec and Ontario, in scattered stands through north-central Manitoba and Saskatchewan, and northern Alberta. It shouldn't surprise you to know that balsam fir can withstand the harsh cold more than other fir species.

Stands of balsam fir can sometimes be found near or within stands of black spruce, white spruce, and aspen. Take a close look at the needles, and you'll see that they are  $\frac{3}{4}$  to 1" long, flat, and often curved. You know the

memorable look and smell of the balsam fir: tall, dark, imposing spires easily spotted in the woods mixed with a sweet turpentine smell that's created by the abundant resin in the bark and needles. No wonder this species is popular for Christmas trees and wreaths.

### How is Balsam Fir used?

In the U.S., balsam fir is one of 10 wood species combined in the commercial Spruce-Pine-Fir south (SPFs) grouping for design values; look for the SPFs on the grade stamp to ensure you're buying a quality product.

The wood is most often used for light-frame construction, interior knotty paneling, and industrial wood packaging. Lumber produced from balsam fir generally grades out as No. 1 and No. 2 in dimensions of 2x4 and 2x6 and is frequently used in all types of general home construction.

According to the Northeastern Lumber Manufacturers Association, of the total SPFs-stamped lumber shipments reported by NELMA mills across the Northeast and over to the Great Lakes, about 20% includes balsam fir. This works out to approximately 215 million bd. ft. annually.

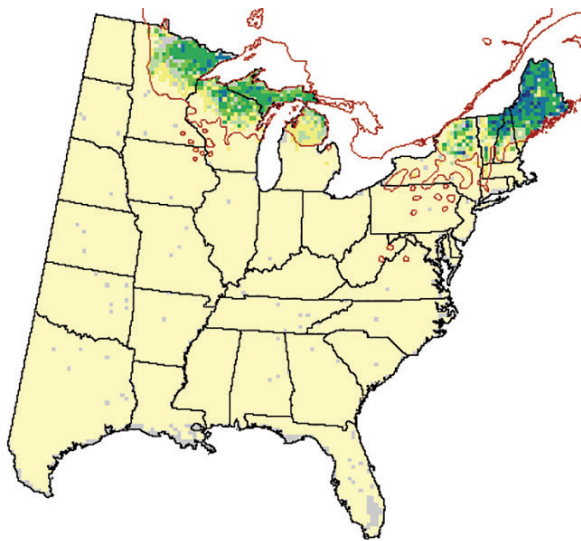
### Sustainability

Will we ever run out of balsam fir? Not in this lifetime, or that of our children, or even their children's children. Wood is a naturally renewable resource: it's not finite, it's not disappearing. Fact is, there are more forests in the U.S. today than there was when Thomas Jefferson drank tea at Monticello. As always, more trees are planted in the U.S. for every one harvested, ensuring healthy forests and healthy forest industries for years to come.

As building products companies are under pressure to reveal and share their environmental impact and commitment to all that is green, it's important to cast an accurate lens on the lumber industry. According to multiple sources, the U.S. forest products industry plants, on average, 2.5 to three trees annually for each one harvested. Reforestation efforts vary from region to region, with some areas coming in with a much higher ratio. Our forests—including those of balsam fir—are growing, expanding, and healthy, which is good news to those of us who live among them.

For more info about balsam fir or other species from New England to the Great Lakes, visit [www.nelma.org](http://www.nelma.org).

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USDA FOREST SERVICE: Balsam fir distribution map in the U.S.