

## Corkbark Fir

The Corkbark fir is very similar to the subalpine fir. The distinguishing feature is pale, nearly white, bark which makes this tree stand out among other trees, almost like an aspen. The bark is usually yielding but tough, not brittle or flaky. The color is pale ash gray, creamy white, or yellow-white. The bark is irregularly ridged or checkered, sometimes very thick, soft, cork-like, or spongy. Subalpine fir bark is darker gray, and smooth up to 12 inches (30 cm) in trunk diameter or more, and then starts to form scales.

Corkbark fir has blue needles that can rival the Blue spruce for color. The large mature needles are about 1 inch (2.5 cm) long, reaching 1 1/2 inches (4.0 cm), and naturally flat like all fir needles (not sharp and stiff like Blue spruce needles). The cones are like the cones on the Subalpine fir. Corkbark fir typically reaches 30 to 60 feet (9 to 18 m) in height, and 6 inches to 18 inches (15 to 45 cm) in trunk diameter.

Corkbark fir is found in the mountains west and south of the Arkansas River, at elevations where Subalpine fir would be expected, or a little lower, from 8000 to 11000 or 12000 feet (2100 to 3600 m). Typical locations are the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and the San Juan Mountains. It is more common on Wolf Creek Pass.

Corkbark fir can form climax spruce-fir forests with Engelmann spruce. It is possible that all or nearly all the fir growing in the mountains of northern New Mexico is Corkbark fir, rather than Subalpine fir. If so, there should be a transition zone where both are found, near the southern boundary of Colorado.

The largest Corkbark fir grows near Ruidoso New Mexico; it was 111 feet (34 m) tall and 13 feet 9 inches (4.1 m) around when last measured. In windy exposed high locations Corkbark fir may be dwarfed or deformed like Subalpine fir in such a setting. Corkbark fir is the lightest American wood, weighing only 17 pounds per cubic foot, and is correspondingly weak, so it has little value as lumber. The scientific name is *Abies arizonica* Merriam.

Copyright © 1998 - 2011 S. K. Wier. Reproduction, reuse, or retransmission prohibited without prior written permission from the author. Individuals may print one copy for their personal use.