

Norfolk Island Pine, Holiday Centerpiece

By Susan Camp

Around Thanksgiving every year, grocery and big box stores set up outdoor displays of pretty, miniature evergreen trees decorated with red ribbons. These tiny, potted trees are Norfolk Island pines, and they are far more interesting than you would imagine.

Many people think that because of its common name, Norfolk Island pine is an eastern North American native pine tree. It is neither North American nor a member of the pine family. Norfolk Island pine (*Araucaria heterophylla*) is an evergreen conifer member of a pre-historic family that survived the extinction of the dinosaurs only on Norfolk Island, which is located in the South Pacific between New Zealand, Australia, and the island of New Caledonia. Its cousin is the South American monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*).

Discovered by Captain James Cook on his second Pacific voyage in 1772 to 1775, the 100 to 200-foot-tall, straight-trunked Norfolk Island pines initially were deemed strong enough to use as masts on sailing ships. Despite their resilience to high winds and salt tolerance in their native habitat, the trunks proved unsuitable for use as masts, and the industry was soon abandoned.

Today, Norfolk Island pines grow in tropical coastal areas of the South Pacific, South and Central America, in Mediterranean countries, India, and the east and west coasts of Florida and Hawaii. The trees cannot tolerate temperatures below 35°F, so they survive outdoors in North America only in USDA Hardiness Zones 10 to 11, rarely achieving heights greater than 60 to 80 feet. Most Norfolk Island pines sold in the United States are grown in South Florida.

The giant conifers are the same species as the cute little Norfolk Island pines available in garden centers and grocery stores every November and used as Christmas gifts and table decorations. As houseplants, they are long-lived and grow slowly, reaching no more than 6 to 8 feet in height in a decade.

Heterophylla means “different leaves” and refers to the changes that occur in the shape and texture of the leaves as the tree matures. Juvenile leaves are ½ inch long and needle-like with sharp, inwardly curving tips. Adult leaves are ¼ inch long and grow scale-like along the branches toward the ends. The branches of the adult tree are arranged in whorled, horizontal tiers that radiate from the straight trunk.

Indoors, Norfolk Island pine needs a spot with plenty of sunlight to develop symmetrical growth. Light afternoon shade will help prevent yellowing of the branches. The tree prefers porous, peaty, sandy, well-drained, slightly acidic soil and temperatures between 55 to 65°F.

Water your Norfolk Island pine when the top inch of the soil feels dry to the touch. Too much water or too much light will cause the lower branches to drop off. Although adaptable to dry indoor conditions, your tree might need a boost of humidity. Provide this by placing the pot on top of a saucer filled with gravel and water without letting the pot sit directly in the water. This

will create a microclimate with the increased humidity the tree needs. Turn your plant once a week to maintain its straight, upright growth habit. Some sources recommend a weekly or biweekly application of dilute liquid fertilizer.

Norfolk Island pine is bothered by few insect pests other than spider mites or scale insects. The tree is susceptible to leaf spot, sooty mold, and scale. Mushroom rot can occur with overwatering. Look for trees that have not been sprayed with green paint to enhance the color. The coating of paint can interfere with photosynthesis, causing the plant to weaken or die.

Results of a NASA study indicate that Norfolk Island pines, among other species, can help purify indoor air by removing volatile organic compounds (VOCs) released from cleaning products, glues, paints, and fabric.

For further information on Norfolk Island pine, see the Missouri Botanical Garden Plant Finder entry “*Araucaria heterophylla*” and NCState Extension Gardener Plant Toolbox entry “*Araucaria heterophylla*.”

Enjoy a happy, healthy Holiday Season!