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months. However, this also causes them to lose nutrients, which they can only reclaim as their fallen leaves decay on the ground, a process that takes years to complete. In areas where water and warm air are plentiful, leaves can break down over a few years, and nutrients will be made available for the trees to grow a new set of leaves each spring.

Conifers and other evergreen plants often live in places where water and soil-borne nutrients may be scarce or not be recycled rapidly enough for the plants to recover. In these climates, shedding leaves would mean losing too many resources at once. Instead, they may drop a few at a time, but most will remain in place while new leaves grow. This allows many evergreens to continue photosynthesizing year-round.

Temperature also affects where evergreens can grow. For example, many broad-leaved plants in the warm tropical rain forests are considered evergreens as they retain their leaves through the year. Closer to home, the native broadleaf evergreens like Pacific wax myrtle and deer fern grow best at lower elevations, where winters are mild and cause little damage to larger leaves. However, some broadleaf evergreen species like Pacific rhododendron may be found up in the mountains where their hardier nature allows them to retain their leaves in spite of the cold.

Conifer trees are the most common evergreen plants found at higher elevations. Their needles are especially efficient at retaining water, which helps them to weather dry periods, and they are also highly wind-resistant, able to withstand strong gusts without breaking. The winds help create conifers' cone-shaped profile, which sheds snow easily and leads to fewer damaged branches.

Local evergreens to look for

If you're enjoying the outdoors in the Columbia-Pacific region during winter, you have several species to thank for the year-round green. Starting at the forest floor, look for ferns like the western sword fern and deer fern. While you may see the brown leaves of bracken fern scattered around the forest, its cousins stay lush and green year-round. Look a little closer and you may also see rattlesnake plantain, a low-growing plant in the orchid family. It has dark green, oval-shaped leaves with lighter green veins, growing close to the ground in a rosette. You'll likely also see several species of moss growing on soil and rotting logs, from the fern-like Oregon beaked moss to the star-shaped haircap mosses, each of which boast several species. If you're near a stream or other fresh water source you



might even spy a liverwort or two. These look a bit like layers of tiny lettuce leaves and often grow out of damp soil.

Stand back up and you may find yourself face to face with an evergreen shrub. The aforementioned Pacific wax myrtle can sometimes reach 30 feet in height, the size of a small tree, and sports bunches of long, slender leaves similar to those of a rhododendron, but smaller. Beneath it you may find thickets of salal, with oval leaves and pointed tips (these are popular in the floral industry). Another common local shrub is the aptly named evergreen huckleberry, whose leaves are smaller, ovate, and with fine serrated edges, growing out of red-tinted stems.

Overlooking all of these are the conifer trees, the proud champions of coastal north-west forests. One of the most common is

the Sitka spruce, found only on the coast; its blue-tinted needles have sharp ends. The needles of the Western hemlock are shorter, round at the tip, and a true green; the top-most branch of the tree distinctively flops over to the side. Western red cedar also grows well here, with its flat and scaly needles revealing that it's actually a type of cypress rather than a cedar. Finally, along the beach, scrubby shore pines seem to sprout up anywhere the dunes stop moving.

Next time you're enjoying the coast's wet, windy winter outdoors, take a moment to appreciate these well-adapted plants that help to keep the region green year-round!

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Photos by Rebecca Lexa

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A Sitka spruce tree. Pacific wax myrtle. A western sword fern.