



Photo by Walter Siegmund

Plants for Birds

Ponderosa Pine

- **Scientific Name:** *Pinus ponderosa*
- **Height:** 60 to 100 ft tall in cultivation
- **Hardiness:** Zone 3
- **Wildlife Value:** Food source for many birds and provides cover, nesting and roosting sites.

Ponderosa Pine, the state tree of Montana, is a beautiful conifer to add to your bird friendly garden. It's popular as an ornamental providing perennial color, a more natural, open form to the garden and large seed cones which are often collected and used as seasonal decoration. This long-lived native (300-500 yrs) has long, deep green needles and reddish bark with the sweet aroma of vanilla or butterscotch. Its seeds provide food to many birds and animals such as chickadees, grosbeaks, crossbills, mourning doves, finches, jays, towhees, sparrows, turkeys, nutcrackers, chipmunks, and squirrels. Also, the trees provide valuable cover, roosting places and nesting sites for birds to raise young. Dusky grouse and spruce grouse will eat the needles and use the needles for building nests. Woodpeckers dig for insects hidden in the bark.

Ponderosa pine occurs throughout the mountainous areas of the western US from Montana to Mexico. These giants, growing over 200 feet tall at times, occur in drier mixed forests, in pure stands, in grasslands, and in rocky exposed sites. In a home landscape expect a ponderosa pine to typically grow 60 to 100 ft high and 25 to 30 ft wide, making it well suited for larger yards. It grows best in full sun and well drained dry soils and is drought tolerant. It has an extensive, spreading root system plus a deep tap root making it excellent for windbreaks, buffer strips and mass landscape plantings.

Some interesting facts about *Pinus ponderosa*: It is used in dendrology (tree ring dating) to study historic climate change and to precisely date Native American archeological sites. Native Americans used all parts of the plant, medicinally and for food, and ponderosa pine was made into canoes for Lewis and Clark after they crossed the Rocky Mountains into the headwaters of the Columbia River.

Plant this native in your garden and enjoy watching nuthatches, finches, grosbeaks and many more birds flock to your yard for food and cover. Other hardy pines that can provide similar value to birds are Scotch Pine and Austrian Pine. Both of these non-natives grow less tall and are more appropriate for small yards.

- Leslie Eddington