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Foraging for Pine Needles

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As long as humans have been humans we have foraged for desired commodities. Some forage for incredible wild edibles, and others for ripe nectarines with just the right smell and feel at the neighborhood fruit stand. There is also aluminium can foraging, discount store foraging for garden tools and Smith & Hawken garden books, and my personal favorite foraging target, pine needles. I enjoy pine needling. Big time.

Most of us in the native plant clubs community recognize that pine needles make an excellent mulch in our gardens. We recognize that they are a renewable resource, that the waxy coat on the needle surface contains germination inhibitors that retard weed seed germination, and that they are costly to purchase.

My wife and I have been in the native plant frame of mind for over three years. We had our garden professionally designed and we took the project over from there. Our designer recommended recycled wood chip mulch for the pathways and pine needle mulch for the shrubs and wildflowers.

We were unpleasantly surprised when we acquired our first pickup truck load of baled pine needles at a local garden center. It cost about \$47 for enough bales to level fill my short-bed, full-sized pickup truck. The needles were brittle, dull, dried out, and covered a remarkably small area. When we looked at the scope of the project, we could see that it would cost over \$1000 per year for commercially obtained pine needles.

Not a pretty picture.

It is not the fault of the garden centers that pine needles are so costly. Raking up needles is labor intensive. Transportation from the areas of harvest adds to the expense. Also, pine trees don't drop needles the year round. The needle drop season runs roughly from June to January in a series of waves, depending on weather (and probably species of pine tree). My way around this financial dilemma is to collect the needles myself.

Harvesting pine needles is labor intensive but requires very little in the way of tools. The main requirements are pine trees and access to a pickup truck or trailer so that meaningful quantities of needles can be collected. I use a pitchfork to collect needles and a ubiquitous cheap blue plastic tarp to secure my needles in place in my pickup while in transit from one site to another (the police like that). The pitchfork is actually an Ames "5 tine manure fork" that is available at hardware stores or the modern multiplex home centers. Make certain

that the welds are good and try to select a fork that feels good to you. Indulge yourself - that fork can save you a great deal of mulch money that can be spent on plants or compost instead.

You can scout for pine trees any time of the year. Drive around and look for them! Develop a circuit where you can harvest needles from a number of trees in an efficient manner. There are a surprising number of suitable pine trees around once you key onto them. The ideal situation is several big fat pine trees hanging over a residential street. Large diameter trees produce far more needles than small trees. Harvesting from grassy areas is harder because you have to fight the resistance of the grass but it is sometimes worthwhile if the site is rich in needles or pickings are slim elsewhere.

After the needles fall onto the street, the wind from passing cars very politely blows the needles toward the sides of the street. When the needles build up on the street edge, they can be collected very easily by lightly holding the wooden end of the fork in one hand and skating the tines on the pavement ahead of you as you walk. You will get the idea before long. When your first pile gets too big to push, leave that pile and continue on down the street again until you have the area "cleaned up." Use the fork to load the needle piles into your truck or trailer. Stomp the needles down layer by layer to maximize the haul.

Maintaining a good attitude while collecting is important. Needling is hard labor. A great deal of walking has to be done in the collection process. The weather is miserably hot for a big part of the drop season. Forking a wet pile of needles into a truck is difficult. Broken glass can be a problem. Five million cigarette butts may show up in the mulch when collected in areas where traffic levels are high. But, it is worth it. It is great exercise and fun to go into an area where the needles are thick and no one in that area realizes how valuable the needles are to gardeners. One of the good things is that no one cares one twit about your cleaning up the needles and getting them off the street. Life can be good.

Don't try to collect every needle out there, go for productivity. Hit the areas that are needle rich and don't waste your time where it would take all day to get a half a pickup load of needles. The most productive haul I have achieved was from a very affluent neighborhood where I am basically ignored. In ninety minutes, I collected at least \$150 worth of pine needles. The needles were

damp, packed down nicely, were higher than the cab of the truck, and weighed in the vicinity of 1000 pounds.



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