

Cooks and Norfolks – when pines don't look like pines

If you have houseplants chances are good that you have a super hardy Norfolk Island pine. These wonderful trees can sit in our cold gloomy rooms and thrive. In fact you can forget to water them and they will show their displeasure by dumping a small branch or two. If you encourage a Norfolk, you will have a massive tree in your house and have to do some pruning. As we all know, pruning houseplants can go very badly. I pruned my poor mother's jade plant into terminal submission. She was not pleased with me!

Norfolk pines are commonly for sale in grocery stores and garden centres, usually in the houseplant section because they are not cold hardy in our climate. They are often sold in clusters of saplings all potted in the same pot. Those poor saplings fight it out with each other and no one thrives. Be kind and prune out the other saplings and let one be dominant.

Are these actually pines? Yes they are in the pine family but are part of the ancient group Araucaricaea. Back in Jurassic times dinosaurs happily gnawed away for hours on these trees. This was a pity because both the dinosaurs and the most of these pines died out 64 million years ago in the massive Cretaceous extinction. Very few of that ancient species survived but those that did, spread out through tropical regions of the world. In 1995 in a remote valley in Australia a living fossil "Woolemia" was found. This newly discovered member of the Araucariaceae drove plant propagators wild with excitement and now you can purchase one at our local garden centre.



Norfolk Island Pines are not just from Norfolk Island but are common through the tropics. If you are lucky enough to go on a trip to the tropics you will likely meet the Cook Pine. It's a bit different looking than the Norfolk Island pine but still has the lovely ropy needles and an open almost lacy canopy that allows other plants and vines to grow through them. On the big island of Hawaii near Kona there is a cook pine that has Bougainvillea growing up through the whole tree. In full bloom this is spectacular!

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