

LOOK AGAIN !

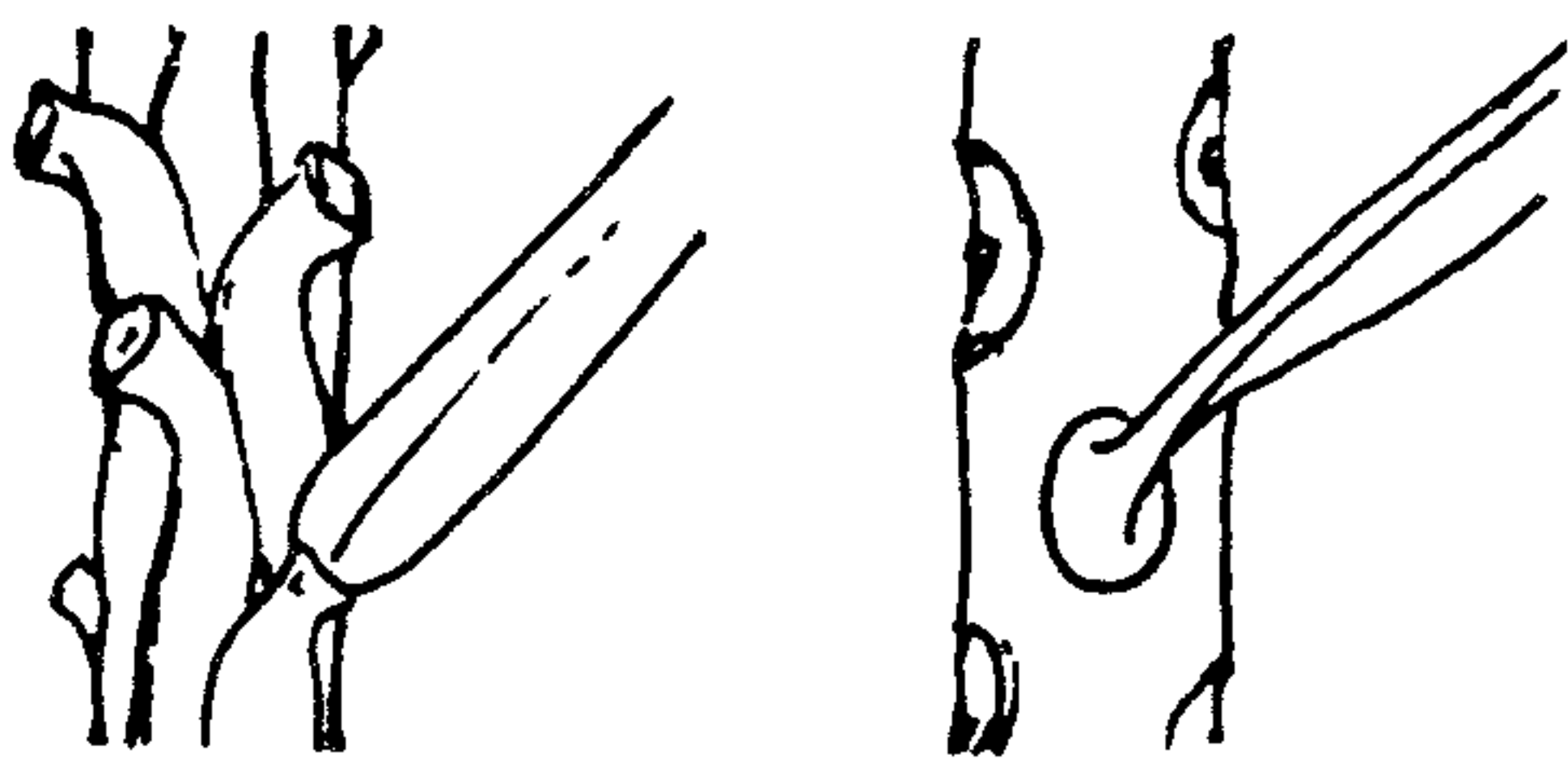
"He Balsam" and "She Balsam" - the names would seem to indicate a dioecious species, or at least very similar plants, but such is not the case at all. They differ from each other in many ways, and the wonder is that we can so easily be confused even when we see the two side by side.

First of all, the name "He Balsam" is simply a local one given to a Red Spruce (Picea rubens) that happens to be growing in the southern highlands instead of, say, the Adirondacks or Ontario. "She Balsam" probably has a little more legitimacy, since the tree it applies to is found only in the Southern Appalachians; technically it is a Fraser Fir (Abies fraseri).

Both trees are conifers, and that alerts us to a basic difference: On spruces the cones are pendulous and on firs they are upright. Also, the cones of spruces fall from the tree intact, but those of firs usually disintegrate, dropping their scales one by one.



So far so good, but often the cones are high on the trees and out of view. So let's look at the needles. Spruce needles are square in cross-section and can be twirled between the thumb and forefinger, while fir needles are distinctly flat. Just remember: "S" = Square = Spruce, "F" = Flat = Fir. Also look at their attachment to the twigs.



Spruce needles are mounted on short stubby projections which remain after the needles are removed. Fir needles, on the other hand, are attached directly to the twigs and leave only smooth, flat, circular scars.

The name "balsam" does not belong to any genus, but it has been freely used in vernacular names not only for firs and spruces but for Balsam Poplar, the old-fashioned garden Impatiens, and other plants. The word also refers to resinous secretions of certain trees and shrubs, notably "Canada balsam", which is obtained from Balsam Fir and is used in preparing microscope slides. Such a substance is produced copiously by Fraser Fir and collects in blisters beneath the thin outer bark. It is this characteristic, with its suggestion of "a tree that gives milk", that is thought to provide an explanation for the colloquial term "She Balsam".

Dick Smith