

Tread safely, carry a trekking pole?



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

My grandfather always hiked with a walking stick. He used sawed off old broomsticks, sanded a bit so splinters wouldn't get in his hands. He used the stick, not so much for support, but to poke and prod around the brush as he hiked through the woods. I think he also carried the stick to whack me upside the head when I got out of line, but that is another story.

Nowadays, I see people walking around with trekking poles, which look a lot like glorified ski poles to me. For many experienced hikers they have become standard equipment. I even see hunters using them now, where a couple decades ago, you never saw them. The question is do you really need them? The straight answer is maybe.

Trekking poles and hiking poles are basically the same thing. Their purpose is to provide stability and allow hikers to get into a good rhythm when they walk. They can also help spread your body weight. Poles can be very useful when traversing unstable terrain.

The first set was called Nordic Walking Poles, and were introduced to the sports equipment world in 1988, by a company called Exerstrider. From there, the term trekking poles came to existence.

A walking stick is nothing new. Prehistoric man used a walking stick to help maintain balance on uneven ground, ford slippery stream beds, defensive weapon against small animals, and to give unruly kids a whack upside the head. The walking stick, sometimes called a walking staff, was a symbol of authority and social status in some cultures.

In 1921, a gentleman by the name of James Biggs of Bristol claimed to have invented the first walking stick. Mr. Biggs was blind and felt threatened by traffic near his home, so he painted his walking stick bright white so he would be more visible to passing motorists. Giving him credit for inventing walking sticks is a stretch. Perhaps we can give him credit for being the first guy to paint one. After all, people have used a walking cane for support of injured legs and knees for centuries.

If you are backpacking with a heavy pack, there is no doubt a set of trekking poles can be a help. They can keep you stable, especially going up or down hill, and especially when you have to side-hill.

When you cross a stream, even without a pack, the crossing can be dangerous. When you have a set of poles to give you anchor points as you slide your way across a slippery stream bed, it can be a lifesaver. This is especially true when you have dirty water and don't know how deep it is. The pole can be a quick "depth finder" to help keep you from going high heels over tin cups in the screaming current.

The same can be said about hiking in snow or ice conditions. Some folks wear slip-on cleat attachments on the soles of their



A walking stick stopped this deadly Yarara snake in his tracks while I was on a safari in Argentina. (Mark Rackay/Special to the MDP)

footwear for traction. I have never found that particularly helpful. To me, it seemed like I was walking around in my old baseball cleats. The trekking poles really fill the need here, providing balance on a slippery trail.

Going uphill, the poles can give you a little extra lift as you climb, allowing your arms to join in the fun and not leave it all to the legs. Same is true for going downhill, as the poles can provide some braking when you get moving too fast. All of this is more evident when you have 40 pounds of pack on your backside.

For workout enthusiasts, there is some benefit for using trekking poles. If you have problems with your hands swelling or tingling when you hike, the poles will keep your hands closer to the level of the heart,

improving blood flow returning to your heart.

There is no denying that using a set of trekking poles makes your hike more of a full-body workout. Your arms moving back and forth will also help you expend more energy and get you into a nice cadence as you move down the trail.

There are people who carry the poles as a defensive tool in the event they are attacked by bears, lions, zombies, or whatever is out stalking hikers and backpackers these days. Personally, I leave the defensive work to my sidearm, although I don't worry much about bears, lions or tigers. It's the two-legged predators that give me pause more than the four-legged ones.

The poles can be useful for providing defense against poison ivy, sumac,

poison oak, and those pull back thorn vines that can ruin your day. Using the poles to push the vermin vegetation out of the way allows you to pass on by.

There has been a great deal of press over the years that trekking poles help save wear and tear on your knees when you hike, some claiming as much as 25% of the strain is removed. Some studies compared shock absorbing poles, regular poles, and hiking without poles, and found no difference, so I guess the jury is still out. Personally, I have knee pain all the time anyway, and have found proper footwear as the most important thing to help with that.

There are poles made of aluminum, and ultralight poles made of carbon fiber. The carbon fiber is better at shock absorbing but cannot take the beating

that the aluminum poles can take. You need to decide how rough the terrain you plan on encountering before you decide.

I don't use trekking poles. Most of my hiking and packing is for hunting. I carry a rifle, pack, extra clothes and binoculars or a spotting scope. The last thing I need is something else to lug around. With both hands full of a trekking pole, it is difficult to transition to a stopping position and use the binoculars to glass. For me, it is just too much going on.

When I hike or hunt in the jungle areas, the walking stick is a necessity, for prodding along in front of me for snakes and other reptiles that want to take a bite out of me. There was one occasion in Argentina when I used a set of sticks to stop a venomous snake from biting a person with me.

The final decision for trekking poles rests with the individual. Some folks love them, and some hate them. For me, the jury is still out. I suppose I could carry a walking stick when I hike with the grandkids, for those unruly moments, but my grandson is almost as big as me now.

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Evergreens are a lot like cute puppies



Gardening From A to Z

By Linda Corwine McIntosh

I'm not sure why, but it seems almost as hard to resist buying a cute little evergreen as it is a playful puppy or a purring kitten. And a lot of people find out the hard way that before you know it, evergreens, as well as a puppy or kitten,

can turn into more work than you imagined.

It's not the poor little evergreen's fault when it becomes a giant beast taking over a sidewalk or covering up a window or door. My best advice is, know what you're buying before you bring it home!

I'm thinking there's probably an evergreen that is the right size for pretty much any location that I can think of. You just have to search a little bit, and maybe do a little homework, or ask questions when you're in the garden center to discover the one that's just right for you. The conifer selections are about as broad as the number of dog breeds.

Evergreens can range from different shades of green to blue-green, blue, and golden yellow. Some even have white or yellow tips, but I personally think those look like something is seriously wrong with the tree and I've yet to acquire a fondness for that look. Some trees have needles that change from one color to another as the tree matures. Some are even deer resistant.

If you decide to start growing a conifer tree, don't forget to take advantage of all of the different forms and shapes that are available. You can find conifers with oval shapes, conical, globular, and columnar.

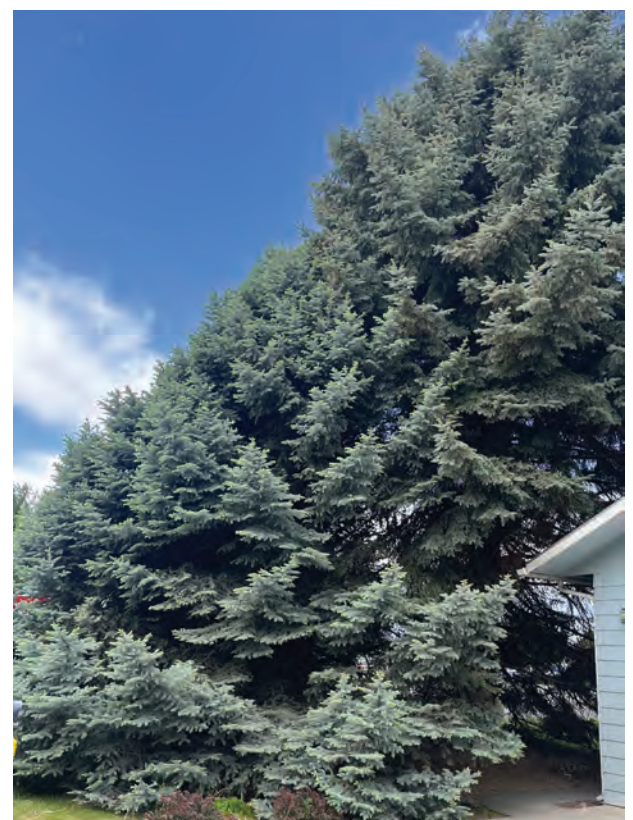
You can also find

dwarf varieties that are narrow upright, mounding, prostrate, spreading, and cushion. It almost sounds like too many choices. In your excitement don't forget to measure the location where you want to place the tree or shrub.

I can't overemphasize how important it is to know the size your plant will become when it's fully-grown and how much room it has to grow.

Blue spruce is one of those trees that I frequently see outgrowing their home. Sometimes the tag will say "dwarf" but you need to read on to see what dwarf actually means.

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That cute little evergreen could grow up to become a huge tree. Knowing the mature size of the tree before you buy it can save you a lot of headaches down the road. (Linda Corwine/Special to the MDP)

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