

An Evergreen for the Birds and the Garden

Native plants have slowly been gaining in popularity with the general public. Once considered weedy or simply undesirable, many natives such as Goldenrod are now accepted as garden worthy plants. However, that still does not pertain to all our native plants. During my daily drives around New Jersey, one of the most ubiquitous of our native plants that remains ‘undiscovered’ by most gardeners is *Juniperus virginiana*, or Eastern Red Cedar.

Native to eastern and central North America, *Juniperus virginiana* is a member of the



Cupressaceae or Cypress Family. *Juniperus* is a large genus, representing between 50-65+ species that are scattered throughout the northern hemisphere from the arctic to the tropics! This species was first named and described by Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) in 1753. The commonly used species epithet refers to its affiliation with the region of Virginia, which was significantly larger in the 1700’s! *Juniperus* is derived from the combination of the Latin *Junio*, meaning ‘young’ and *Parere*, ‘to produce’, referring to the ‘youthful’ or evergreen leaves. This evergreen foliage is divided into two distinct forms: juvenile and adult. The juvenile foliage (pictured at left) is awl-shaped, light green and sharp to the touch. Around ¼” long, it appears on plants under 3-4 years of age and on shaded or vigorously growing regions

of older plants. By contrast, the adult foliage is a darker green or bluish-green in color and is scale-like. The leaves are a mere 1/16” long, overlap the adjacent leaf and tightly clasps the stem, giving the appearance of a swollen or a green stem!



During the winter months, the foliage will vary from dark green, to a dark purple or occasionally to a copper, depending upon the individual plant. *Juniperus virginiana* is a dioecious plant, with individual plants bearing only female or male cones. The yellow-brown male cones are approximately ⅛” long and appear at the tips of the branches. The pollen is shed in May, at which point the tree often assumes a yellow cast due to the sheer number of the yellowish cones! The female cones (pictured below) do not resemble traditional pine cones, but rather ¼” round, dark blue berries with a white waxy coating. The female cones are often produced in such abundance that the entire tree assumes an attractive, deep bluish-green in appearance. The fruits are a highly desired food by a variety of birds, including Bluebirds, Turkeys and, above all, Cedar Waxwings.

Contrary to its lack of garden use, Eastern Red Cedar is a very easily grown plant! It is actually a pioneer plant, being one of the first trees to populate an open area, as is obvious to anyone that travels Route 287 in New Jersey! The plants are very adaptable to pH and soils extremes, growing happily in clay, silt or sandy soils, whether in mountainous areas or at the shore! Providing that the site basks in full sun and the soil is well-drained, plants will thrive and slowly reach 45-60' in height by 10-20' wide. The photograph on the right shows the variety in form of two plants that have volunteered in an old field. Many of the plants are very upright in form, which can be useful for gardens where space is at a premium. Since there is minimal root competition when they are grown in close proximity, they make an excellent barrier or wind break. The



challenge is growing other plants beneath Eastern Red Cedar; the dense canopy produces a very dry rain shadow and the accumulating fallen foliage will slowly raise the soil pH. I have personally had good luck with growing Hellebores (*Helleborus* species, pictured on the left),



Pennsylvania Sedge (*Carex pennsylvanica*) and Wood Hyacinths (*Hyacinthoides hispanica*, pictured at the right) near or beneath the trees, but the palette is certainly limited.

Juniperus virginiana has also changed the ecology in regions of North America that once relied on fire ecology to sustain plant populations. Since it is a pioneer plant, the current focus on reducing fires has allowed this tree to populate and out-compete plants native to the prairies.



Despite its cosmopolitan nature, most people fail to recognize its unique and attractive personality that it can bring to their Gardens. There are numerous forms available, with some such as Emerald Sentinel™ having a decidedly columnar habit. The blue fruits (pictured on left) are not only food for wildlife, but aid in winter garden interest, provide attractive accents to Holiday decorations and serve as the flavor in gin!

The bark is an attractive reddish brown that gradually exfoliates in vertical strips (as seen on the right) and again adds winter interest. Economically, the heartwood is an attractive mahogany-red and repels moths, making it the lumber of choice for closets and blanket chests. The lumber was also used for pencils and its decay resistance made it opportune for fence posts. In fact, Native American Indians used to demark their territory with these posts and supposedly the city of Baton Rouge received its name from vast number of the red posts that were found in the area!

Of course, *Juniperus virginiana* is not perfect! Many forms are more open, stunted or have a form that is not deemed attractive, which explains why this plant is not currently main stream! Fortunately, there are numerous forms, from which improved selections can continue to be made. Certainly, a great plant for the birds, but it is time for this durable native evergreen to become more of Garden staple!

