

Trees and a Bit of Botany

This column started with a library book, a recent paperback by Colin Tudge “The Tree”. To quote from the cover, the book is a blend of history, science, philosophy and environmentalism. And from the preface, “science in the service of appreciation, and appreciation in the service of reverence, which, in the face of wonders that are not of our making, is our only proper response.” Reverence I have in abundance but it was the science part I needed so, you see, I had to stop by the book store and order my own copy.

We hardly need an invitation to explore this spring world to find hope after the winter of our discontent. Most gardeners work to spread the joy of gardening to everyone they can buttonhole. Trees are a good starting point. I doubt I’ve ever met a tree I didn’t like, but I recently met an outstanding small conifer, *Cryptomeria*, a Japanese cedar with foliage soft to the touch and a gentle fountain shape.

It belongs to the *Taxodiaceae* family and it is evergreen and monoecious, which means having both male and female reproductive organs in the same plant rather than dioecious, having them on different plants. This is worth knowing about plants such as dioecious hollies. If you want them to have berries you have to be sure there is a male nearby to permit your female to produce berries.

The *Cryptomeria* grows in full sun or part shade and although I think it too pretty for a hedge plant, it can be severely coppiced, that is, cut way back in spring and survive! Most cone-bearing trees will not tolerate this treatment. Called “Sugi” in Japan where there are forests of *Cryptomeria*, forests that may be a remnant of an ancient plantation: the timber turns dark green when buried in the ground and it eventually becomes “jindai-sugi” valued as a semi-precious stone.

Born to be a hedge is a relative in the *Taxaceae* family, *Taxus* or Yew. Yew can become 30 feet tall and 20 feet wide, but there are plenty of smaller sizes available. So long-lived that a specimen in Scotland is said to have sheltered a sleeping Pontius Pilate and once the source of English longbows, yew is still valued for topiary and its fine, rich dark green foliage makes a splendid background for rose and flower beds. Found in the Northern Hemisphere, ten species are native to North America. Among their virtues is a tolerance for coastal exposure and dry soils. *Taxus x media* ‘Everlow’ grows slowly to a height of 18 inches and a width of 4 to 5 feet and *T. densiformis* is bushy and dense to 4 to 6 ft.

Another related tree is *Taxodium*, a genus of two species of upright conical monoecious, deciduous conifers. One of these is *T. distichum*, the bald cypress or swamp cypress that turns rust brown in autumn before losing its leaves. If you have a soggy wet spot on your property, this tree will be a happy camper. I have been told it will tolerate a drier site but the one I have in a dry spot is still a weakling after seven years.

A good tree for here, despite its ubiquity, is *Juniperus virginiana*, called pencil or red cedar although it is not a cedar. Beloved of birds, it is a member of the *Cupressaceae* family. It is not wise to plant this evergreen near an orchard as it is an alternative host to a fungus, *Gymnosporangium juniperi-virginianae*, that infects both apples and certain species of juniper. This fungus won’t spread apple to apple or juniper to juniper but must alternate between the two. The spores from orange galls on junipers are wind blown to apple trees. If you have this problem in your orchard early spring is the time to prevent it by spraying with a fungicide containing zineb or ferbam. It should be done again when half the blossoms have blown off and the third dose ten days later. Your solution may differ so follow the directions given on the package of fungicide you have selected.

The ‘real’ cedars belong to the *Pinaceae* family and are beautiful landscape trees in the right place. Native from Turkey to Lebanon is *Cedrus libani*, the cedar of Lebanon which can reach 100 feet. A subspecies is *C. atlantica*, boasting the ‘blue Atlas’ cedar, a sivery tree with an independent shape. Various golds and greens distinguish the Deodar cedars, some like, ‘Aurea’ growing to a mere 15 feet.