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Redcedars winter's green sentinels

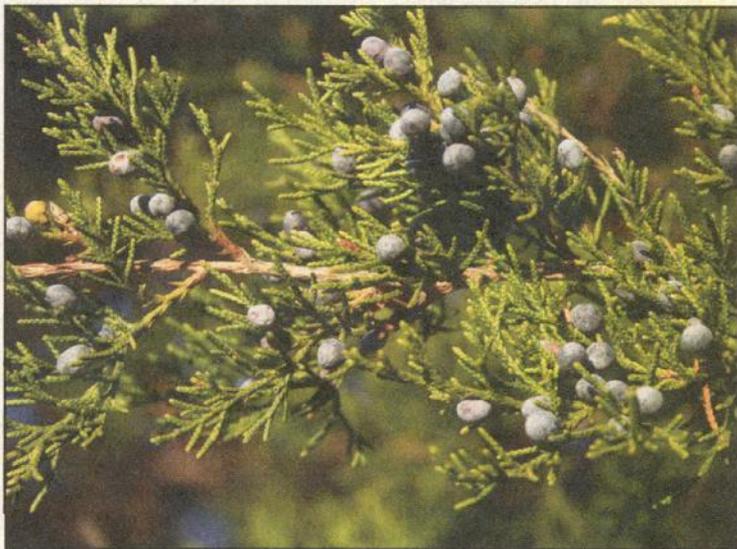
By Robert Naczi

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At this time of year when most trees appear lifeless, evergreen eastern redcedar trees stand like sentinels to remind us that living plants surround us. This tree is easy to identify by its dark green foliage, spire-like or conical form, the majority of its leaves short and scale-like, and bluish, berry-like cones.

Eastern redcedar is common throughout most of its large geographic range (southern Quebec west to North Dakota, south to Florida and Texas). The scientific name (*Juniperus virginiana*) reveals the true relationships of the tree. Eastern redcedar is a juniper rather than a cedar. The true cedars (*Cedrus* species) are native to the Eastern Hemisphere.

Tolerant of many environmental conditions, eastern redcedar grows in a variety of habitats. It is especially common on roadsides, old fields and fencerows. Its ability to grow in poor soils, susceptibility to few pests and diseases, and attractive appearance make eastern redcedar an important conifer for cultivation. Though striking cultivars are available, it is not as popular in horticulture as several non-na-



Submitted photo

Eastern redcedar is easy to identify by its dark green foliage, spire-like or conical form, the majority of its leaves short and scale-like, and bluish, berrylike cones. However, it is actually a member of the juniper family.

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five juniper species, probably because eastern redcedar is an alternate host for a rust disease of apples. Another thing to realize when considering landscaping with this species is that eastern redcedar should not be planted close to buildings because the trees burn relatively easily.

The benefits to wildlife from this tree are immense. Eastern redcedar provides nesting sites and roosting cover for birds. Deer, too, find cover in juniper thickets. Many birds and mammals feed on the cones, which are rich in fats and carbohydrates. Easily overlooked but of critical value is the role redcedars play as windbreaks to reduce soil erosion and desiccation.

The reddish heartwood explains why these trees are called "redcedars." This heartwood gives the tree ample economic importance. Cedar chests, cedarwood oil, fenceposts and pencils are important products of eastern redcedar wood. Because the aromatic wood is repellent to moths, it is a fine wood for chests and closets.

Also because of insect repellency, we use cedarwood oil in the cabinets in which we store dried plant specimens at the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium. Fenceposts made from the durable wood have great longevity. Historically, Eastern Redcedar furnished the wood for nearly all pencils. Today, several tree species are used, though redcedars are still important for this purpose.

Editor's note: Robert Naczi is curator of the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium at Delaware State University. The herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education and outreach about plant identifications, locations and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or call 857-6450 (Dr. Robert Naczi) for more information about this article.