

Rethinking Conifers

(Editors Note: This article is the fourth of a series exploring plants and horticulture on Maine's Mt Desert Island and Acadia National Park.)

Conifers are a significant part of a landscape design and can be used for a variety of reasons. With their evergreen foliage, they can serve as a backdrop for flowering trees, shrubs, and flowers, installed to create privacy screens, or utilized as specimen plants.

Whatever their use, we tend to forget them at times because of their constant green color over the four seasons. Contrast that to many of our deciduous trees and shrubs. When a crabapple or serviceberry is in full flower, it pops because it is something new. Those blossoms will disappear in a couple of weeks and so we enjoy that short burst of beauty while we can. My recent trip to Maine led me to once again appreciate the beauty of some of our native conifers.

During my hiking trips, I was hoping to catch a glimpse of a creeping juniper (Juniperus horizontalis); a low growing groundcover and common mainstay in our landscapes. In fact, one of the most popular cultivars is 'Bar Harbor', named because of its discovery on Mt. Desert Island.

Although I didn't encounter J. horizontalis, I did run across a related species, J. communis (ground juniper) while hiking ANP's Beech Cliff Trail (one of the 'iron rung' routes). In an everyday landscape, I probably wouldn't have given it another thought but it was amazing to see it clinging to life in rock crevices. No wonder this is a workhorse within our landscapes as it is very hardy and resilient.

Pitch pine, native from Canada down to Georgia, is not utilized in our Pennsylvania landscapes because it is not very ornamental. Other pine species, such as white pine, are better suited for the landscape. Its true value is for its ability to thrive in poor soils and the wild.

But I suppose beauty is in the eye of the beholder. While walking the Ship Harbor Trail, I came across a pitch pine that was growing on top of a rock shelf. There was enough soil to grow, but the shallow root system plus the constant ocean winds created a twisted, gnarled tree. In this form, it would be a great accent plant for our yards.

Noted horticulturist, Michael Dirr (author of the 'Manual of Woody Landscape Plants') states that arborvitae (Thuja occidentalis) is 'at times over-used in landscape plantings'. I see this most often utilized as hedges or privacy screens in central PA. But on Mt Desert Island, there are groves of the trees. The lower limbs are gone (either from deer browsing in early growth stage or from nearby competition) which allows for the bottom of the tree to shine. The bark is reddish brown and peels off in narrow long strips. With its colored, tapered trunk and large stands, it showed me that it can be more than just screening material.

Sometimes a hike in the woods can lead to a greater appreciation of plant material we encounter in our everyday lives. Whether near or far, get out into our natural environment to explore plant life.

Caption:

juniper – ground juniper finding a toehold on the granite outcroppings of ANP's Beech Cliff Trail

pine – Under stress from a variety of environmental factors and site conditions, pitch pine finds a way to survive along ANP's Bar Harbor Trail

arbs – Along ANP's carriage road system, large stands of native arborvitae showcase their trunk characteristics.