

## THE TREE OF MANY NAMES

Throughout the Natural Area, in the moister, cooler, and shadier spots we find a tree that's very much part of our western forest, the Douglas-fir. Along with its partner, the ponderosa pine, the Douglas-fir has one of the broadest ranges of any North American conifer. This tree has had many common names, including Oregon Pine, Douglas Tree, Douglas spruce, British Columbian Pine, and Red Fir, but is universally known *Pseudotsuga* (false hemlock) *menziesii*. The local variety is called *glauca* or, common name, Interior or Rocky Mountain variety Douglas-fir. This variety has needles that are more blue in color than the lower elevation, coastal cousins that are more green. Our local populations also grow slower, are more tolerate of cold, and have a larger tap root to withstand drought than other varieties. The common name is hyphenated because it isn't a true fir. These labels remind us of the Scottish connection with *menziesii* referring to Achibald



Menzies, a Scottish physician and naturalist who first discovered the tree on Vancouver Island in 1791 when on an expedition to complete the mapping of Captain Cook who had been killed several years earlier. David Douglas, a Scot botanist, identified the tree again in 1826 and imported the tree into Europe.

The tree can be recognized by its needles that are flat with pointed tips with a paler color on the lower surface and are spirally arranged on the twig. Needles are soft and fragrant making it a wonderful Christmas tree. The bark is smooth and grey-brown which, as the tree ages, develops into dark reddish-brown ridges that are twisted and reminiscent of manila rope. Probably the most distinctive feature is the cone that consist of layered scales with three-pointed bracts protruding prominently above each scale. Native American myth explains that each of the three-ended bracts are the tail and two tiny legs of the mice who hid inside of the tree's cones for shelter from forest fire. Over 60 species of insects do live in the cone! Given time, the Douglas Fir can grow up to 300 ft tall and 20 ft in diameter, making them one of the largest trees in the West, right behind the redwoods. The largest surviving Doug-fir is in Idaho. The oldest has been dated as 930 years old and lives in New Mexico.

Douglas-fir is a very useful tree. Douglas-fir timberlands are the most productive softwood sources in the U.S. and Oregon (Doug-fir is the state tree) is the largest producer where vast forest of this tree are known as the "timber basket". These trees are an excellent source of strong lumber which is used for home construction, shipbuilding, plywood, log cabins, poles, and railroad ties. The lumber is also known for its handsome color and grain pattern which makes it suitable for fine furniture, cabinets, floors and paneling. Trees are

*Nature always springs to the surface and manages to show what she is. It is vain to stop or try to drive her back. She breaks through every obstacle, pushes forward, and at last makes for herself a way. - Nicolas Despreaux, French poet (1632-1711)*

browsed by elk, deer and moose. The cones and conifer seeds are a staple food for chipmunks and squirrels. A variety of birds nest in the trees and dine on the cones or seeds that have fallen on the ground.

Their most serious predator is the western spruce budworm that can defoliate entire tracts of the tree. The moth form of the insect lays eggs on the underside of the needles in the fall. The eggs soon hatch into larvae that winter over under bark scales. In the spring larvae feast on new needles and are soon to become moths to start the cycle over again. In the Natural Area, one of the best places to find Douglas-fir is the enchanted ravine, a shady, moister environment perfect for this magnificent plant.

## LISTEN UP

Lately, natural sound recording enthusiasts have found a very practical application for their developing science. The bark beetle has become a major pest in the forest of the west and the destruction caused by their appetite for the live parts of the tree can be seen in several areas in the Dishman Hills Natural Area. Scientist listening to the micosounds of the forest can be an early detection device for beetle infestation. A sharp metal probe is stuck about a half inch into the tree, and the listening begins. Amplified noises are recorded. Healthy trees give off sounds of movement in the wind, but infested trees give off a characteristic beetle racket. Whether this can become a valuable tool in forest management is yet to be seen, but early detection of infestation may be useful in focusing solutions to where they will do the most

## ORGANIZATION NEWS

We are a non-profit organization dedicated to saving nature areas in the Spokane region for public enjoyment and education. Call Michael Hamilton, 747-8147, if you have any questions. We meet every other month on the third Tuesday at Opportunity Elementary School, S. 1109 Wilbur, in the teacher's lounge, 7pm. Since we are on summer break our next meeting will be September 20.

The following are our July donors that have consented to be listed: Marjorie Benander, Diane Casey, Rita Cencich, Helen Fosseen, Charles Gillingham, Don Griffiths, Addie Haynes, Diane Rogers, Ken Swedberg, Jeanne Wilson, and one anonymous donor. Thank you for being summer supporters.

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