

## Hidden Treasures of the Arboretum 'Collyer's Gold' Western Red Cedar

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DANIEL MOUNT

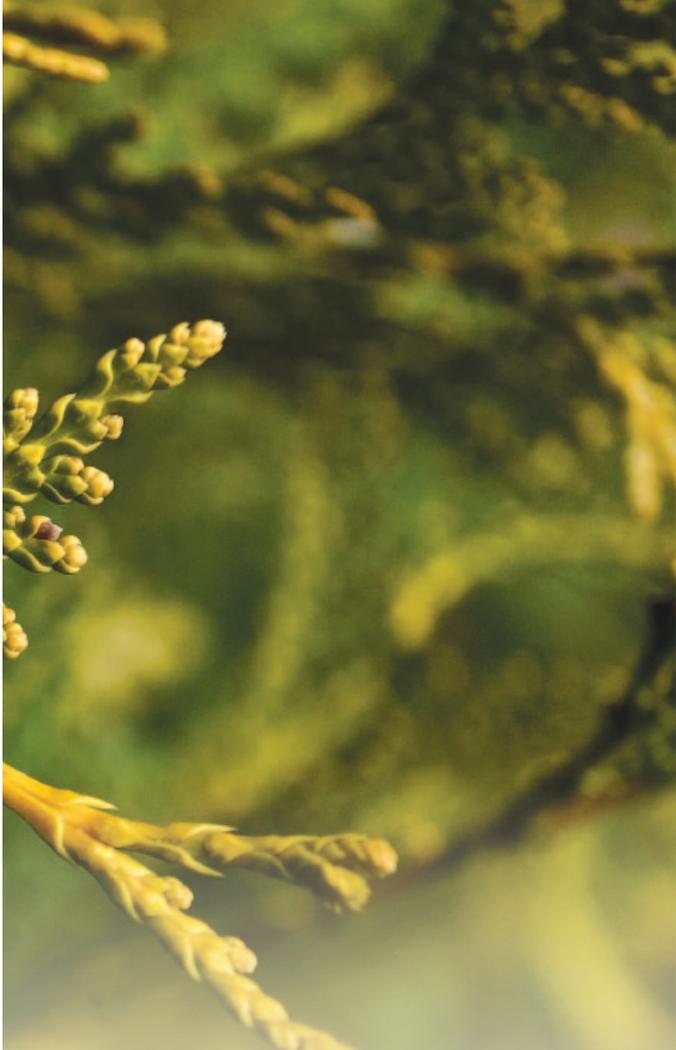
Our native western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*) is a strong and very visible component of the Washington Park Arboretum. University of Washington Botanic Gardens Curator of Living Collections Ray Larson reports that there are well over 500 naturally occurring cedars growing here today. Most of these are remnants from the original forest that covered the land and were too small for harvest when logging took place in the 1880s and 1890s.

Ray estimates that today's cedars are mostly in the 90- to 100-year range, but he believes a few might be upwards of 130 years old. Though impressive for the city, our cedars are mere infants compared to the old-growth trees you'll find in the Olympic National Forest. (A popular one to visit was the 1000-year-old tree that grew at Lake Quinault; unfortunately, this 174-foot giant toppled in 2016.)

*Thuja plicata*, sometimes called giant arborvitae, is the largest of the five species in the *Thuja*

genus, all of which hail from either Eastern Asia or North America. *Thuja occidentalis*, the eastern arborvitae, comes from the northeastern region of this continent and has many dwarf and compact cultivars. These selections are so ubiquitously grown that they overshadow our native red cedar in the nursery trade, despite the fact that they are not always ideal choices for our gardens. (Eastern arborvitae doesn't like our dry summers and needs irrigation to do well here.)

When we look at the large western red cedars of the Olympic Peninsula—and the big ones in the Arboretum's native matrix—most of us hardly think of garden worthiness. The tree's massive gracefulness inspires awe but hardly acquisitiveness, and anyone who has gardened under one knows the pitfalls of trying to grow anything among its dense, shallow and fibrous roots. However, as with its eastern cousin, the western red cedar now comes in many smaller forms that are just right for the average or small home garden.



The Arboretum has always been interested in showcasing cultivars of our native trees with ornamental value. Ten such cultivars of *T. plicata* grow in the collections. The dwarf globose form ‘Gruene Kugel’ and the bizarrely beautiful ‘Whipcord’ are both quite common in Northwest gardens these days. ‘Collyer’s Gold’—an especially handsome plant to this writer’s eye—is less often seen. But we have a fine specimen in the Arboretum, easily found in the Flats section, just west of Azalea Way and immediately to the south of the Forsythia collection. (Find the park bench dedicated to Rudy Monosmith on the east side of Azalea Way, and you know you’re in the right area.)

Brian Mulligan brought this tree back in 1983 from Kevin Lawrence Nurseries in Surrey, England. It is the only *T. plicata* in our collection from a foreign source, but this cultivar is now readily available from some nearby nurseries. (An online source is Forest Farm, in Williams, Oregon; [www.forestfarm.com](http://www.forestfarm.com)).

The Arboretum’s specimen was an 11-inch whip when it arrived in 1983. Nine years later,



when it was planted in its current location, it was three feet tall and had an inch-wide trunk caliper. Today, the plant is a rotund but tidy 15 feet tall.

Admired by nursery people both here and abroad, ‘Collyer’s Gold’ is a slow-growing conifer with a tight, conical habit. It sports golden-green foliage (leaves on younger plants are more distinctly yellow), which can take on orange hues in winter. The Arboretum’s specimen grows happily in the heavy, wet soils of the Flats, which recommends it for gardeners plagued with soggy ground. (A plant I purchased for my own garden in the alluvial floodplain of the Snoqualmie Valley is totally happy.)

No native tree species is more culturally important to the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest than the western red cedar. Likewise, few trees can top the economic importance of red cedar among European settlers, who felled countless acres of it for lumber—including on the land that eventually became the Arboretum. Strangely, this icon of our forests has failed to win over many in the horticultural community. Yet one look at ‘Collyer’s Gold’, and that may begin to change. ☺

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