

The Humble Eastern Redcedar: A True Horticultural Gem

I've often said, somewhat jokingly but with a kernel of truth, that my one primary career goal is to convince home gardeners that the eastern redcedar, *Juniperus virginiana*, is a true horticulture treasure. Here in the southeast, this evergreen has been much maligned and has gained the unfortunately reputation as a tick infested weedy trash tree. One can't even begin to count the millions of them that have been bulldozed, chain-sawed, or killed with herbicides over the past 100 years of urban development. It's not uncommon to see them piled high in and around construction sites, only to be set a-torch in spectacular bonfire fashion. So infrequent now is it to find a venerable mature and majestic survivor, that when I find myself in the presence of one, I gawk at it with childlike amazement and a genuine sense of appreciation of its very existence. With my following paragraphs, I hope to convince you why this tree is far from a trash species, but rather one that is a horticultural gem worthy of use in the landscape.



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(Mature Eastern Redcedar,
Juniperus virginiana, photo
by Justin Stefanski)

First, let me dispel some taxonomic confusion. They are not actually cedars but are in fact junipers, as the botanical name would imply. Their native range stretches north to south from Maine to Florida, and extends as far west as South Dakota and Texas. Driving along any major interstate within their native range, one can observe them in a varying multitude of forms, shapes, sizes, and textures. They typically reach a height of 30-50 ft. with a 20 to 30 ft. spread at full maturity. Their delicate blue-green foliage is classically juniper-like in their immature stage, becoming feathery with age. Their shape can range from pyramidal, columnar or rounded depending on the growing conditions. They are reproductively dioecious, meaning that they have separate male and female trees. Male trees are easy to spot as they will be covered in a layer of golden yellow pollen in spring, with female trees later becoming full of pale blue juniper berries. The bark becomes increasingly more attractive with age, turning a vivid reddish gray that will exfoliate in long strips as the tree matures. They make wonderful stand-alone specimens but also work well when used as screen plantings or planted in mass. At full maturity, they are a majestic sight to behold, with their towering full foliage being beautifully punctuated by the vibrant bark of the trunk and limbs.

Not only is the eastern redcedar a visually appealing tree, you will be hard pressed to find another evergreen that is as versatile, tough and adaptable. Countless times, I have observed them growing on sites that most other evergreens wouldn't stand a chance on. These include sites with compacted, shallow, rocky, and clay soils, with little to no organic content. Sometimes all that is needed for one to grow and thrive is a crack between two large slabs of limestone. They are extremely well adapted to survive climatic extremes, both severe cold and extended periods of high heat and drought. Unlike many of our other more commonly used evergreens, such as Leyland cypress, cryptomeria, or arborvitae, they are far more diseases and insect resistant and have very few pest issues. In terms of survivability and toughness, I would rank them right up there with cockroaches, rats, and Bermuda grass.



(Eastern Redcedar, Juniperus virginiana, female juniper berries and foliage, photo by Justin Stefanski)

Fortunately, several superb commercially available cultivars have hit the market in recent years. For use as a screen, consider using the varieties 'Brodie' or 'Burkii'. 'Brodie' exhibits a dense dark green foliage and will grow to an approximate size of 20 ft. tall and 10 ft. wide. 'Burkii' has foliage bluer in color, with a feathery lace-like texture. It will reach a max height of 20 ft. with a 15 ft. spread. Another wonderful and unique cultivar is 'Taylor', which is a columnar form. It will grow tall and straight with dark greenish blue color to a max height of 25ft. and will stay tight and narrow in habit, not getting more than four ft. wide at full maturity. An excellent shrubby form, 'Grey Owl' exhibits vibrant blue-gray foliage with feathery limbs extending from the center. It will reach a max height of around six ft. and can spread out between six and eight ft. There are

numerous other varieties but the ones I have listed are easy to find and are readily available at local garden centers and nurseries.

My hope in writing this article is that it has given you a reason to reevaluate your perception of the eastern redcedar. If you are looking to replace evergreens or introduce a new species to your landscape, I implore you to consider using one of the excellent cultivars I have described. They will not only add visual value to your landscape, but they will thrive where many other evergreens will not. They are as tough as it comes with few pest issues and will endure cold, heat, floods and drought with relative ease. These trees are a true native treasure that should be appreciated, promoted and preserved for future generations to enjoy. - Happy Gardening!

For questions or comments, please feel free to reach me at the UT/TSU Rutherford County Extension office. Our main office line is 615-898-7710 and my email is jski@utk.edu. Additionally, please check us out on the web at rutherford.tennessee.edu to learn more about upcoming classes and all other Extension programming activities that we offer.