

Conservation Corner

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December 21, 2016

Our third and final color of this Christmas season will be green – a color that’s been in holiday style for thousands of years. Ancient Egyptians brought palm branches into their homes during mid-winter festivals, while ancient Romans decorated their temples with fir trees and exchanged evergreen branches in January as a sign of good luck. Early Northern Europeans gathered evergreen branches to celebrate the winter solstice and during medieval times brought evergreen trees into their homes to celebrate Christmas.

Even though we’re living in the 21st Century, we still “deck the halls with boughs of holly.” Here in Iowa, that might mean bringing in some branches of our only native and probably most important evergreen – the Eastern Red Cedar. As its species name suggests, *Juniperus virginiana* is not a true cedar but a member of the Juniper genus. You may know it as the red, pencil, or aromatic cedar.

Many people consider the Eastern Red Cedar a rather ugly tree, but what it lacks in looks it more than makes up for in toughness and versatility. During the summer their foliage ranges from dark green to blue green while during the winter months it turns a reddish brown for which the tree is named. Fossil evidence reveals that these cedars once covered our continent. In 1564, explorers at Roanoke Island described them as “the tallest and reddest cedars in the world.” Did you know that Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is named for the “red sticks” or cedar poles erected by Native Americans to mark their hunting territories?

Eastern Red Cedars are often one of the first trees to repopulate cleared land. Unlike most pioneer species, however, cedars are long-lived and may reach 900 years of age. Cedar wood is fine-grained, fragrant, very light and durable and makes excellent fence posts, shingles, closets, chests, and pencils. Cedars also provide us with juniper oil while their berries are used in traditional gin flavorings.

Eastern Red Cedars are important wildlife trees complete with twigs and foliage for browsers, good nesting and roosting cover for songbirds, and berries for many birds including cedar waxwings, bluebirds, and turkeys. Cedars are dioecious plants with separate pollen (male) and seed bearing (female) trees. They’re not choosy about where they live and will tolerate heat, salt, wet conditions, droughts, and various soil conditions. They’ll even grow in the middle of a gravel road.

Eastern Red Cedars make great windbreak trees and are included each year in our Annual Spring Tree & Shrub Sale that may be viewed at www.pocahontas-county.com/conservation. To order a red cedar or one of 4 other evergreens, 11 fruit trees, 12 shrubs, or 29 shade and ornamental trees, call 712-335-4395 or stop by the office.

Amid the hustle and bustle of the season, I encourage everyone to slow down, look outdoors, and consider the colors of the bluebird, the cardinal, and the lowly cedar tree. As always, if your family celebrates with a live tree, drop it off at our office after the holidays and we’ll recycle it. Merry Christmas!

