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Bob's News & Musings

Special points of interest:

- **"Sick" conifers are fun to grow**
- **A cemetery where they push up conifers instead of daises**
- **From Big Sky to Badlands with a battle site between**
- **A cover photo of a garden rich in "sick" plants in North Carolina**

Inside this issue:

"Sick" Conifers

From 1974 until 2013, I was an avid conifer collector. I had cutting privileges at several arboretums in the Northeast and traded plants with collectors worldwide. At one point, I had over a thousand selections actively growing in my Eatonville Garden. I used my garden to display conifers for enjoyment and show visitors how they grew. The garden, with its many different areas, was a sales tool, a source of propagation material, and a source of beauty with the myriad of shapes and colors found within each section.

The garden was an outdoor exercise facility of almost five cultivated acres on a hillside. The ground was nearly 50% rocks, and I had to dig every hole with a pick or long, iron pry bar. I planted in threes to vary growing conditions so that I could evaluate my selections fairly. Pruning occurred by cutting an overgrown plant off at ground level as I wanted normal plant growth. I constantly raked sections to clean up fallen branches from the old Douglas firs scattered throughout the gardens. Spraying was a never-ending process to control grass, broad-leafed weeds, and that Northwest bane of gardening: blackberries.

The garden's irrigation was required in a climate where rainfall was rare from June to October. I had to have a second well dug when the house well started sucking air every time I watered a section of the garden. The irrigation system had ten zones, with three sprinklers in each zone. Spring was busy with repairs of frozen sections that split in the winter. Blocked risers and other issues required constant maintenance.

"Sick" Conifers

Every two or three years, I was able to cut up a giant old Douglas fir for firewood. That was due to an occasional severe storm that came through the area and blew one over onto a section of the garden. The real messes to clean up took place with a western red cedar would blow over. The dense branching habit made for a lot of chainsaw work.

The garden work described to this point did not include the work involved with my Coenosium Gardens Nursery. That was a separate workload that I had to fit in with everything else. I also taught school full-time, so my availability for garden work in the spring and fall was limited, especially since I had to sleep for a small part of each 24-hour day.

I suppose you are wondering what this has to do with "sick" conifers. Well, it just so happens that I have always enjoyed a garden with an excellent selection of "sick" conifers. I enjoyed my Coenosium Gardens days of growing, propagating, and selling "sick" conifers. I should also mention that some very "sick" conifers commanded high prices from my customers.

The year before the Y2K Apocalypse of 2000, we started working on the Coenosium Rock Garden, a contribution to the then South Seattle Community College. The first planting was along the west border of the garden to screen it from the street. One of the trees used caused a lot of comments during the first few years after its planting. People were afraid it was dying. They thought the cold may have damaged it (As if it ever gets frigid in Seattle).

Pinus virginiana 'Wate's Golden' is a "sick" plant. It turns bright yellow during the winter. The colder the temperature, the bolder the color. That is not normal to Pinus virginiana, and it does not help the plant survive, although, in this case, it does not appear to cause any particular survival problems. One might argue that it helps the plant survive because hundreds, maybe even thousands, of propagations from this plant for garden use have assured its survival.

Blue and green foliage colors are acceptable for conifers, and many associate them with healthy plants. Yellow foliage, however, is a color that most people associate with "sick" plants. Often, such foliage indicates a nutrient deficiency or poor soil conditions, causing a weak plant.

We can argue with people that our gold plants are not sick, but, in one way, they are "sick". A non-beneficial mutation plays havoc with the plant's pigmentation, causing a reduction in chlorophyll and the exposure of carotenoids, producing a yellow coloration to the foliage. That is a harmful mutation that can lead to the death of the plant.

Witches' brooms are the poster children for "sick" plants. The genetic mutation that produces a witches' broom creates something with a short life span under natural conditions. When a plant is propagated from a witches' broom, it is a "sick" plant that we often grow in a garden setting. It is a miniaturization of a species conifer that adds to the garden's beauty. However, it would last a very short time in a natural setting.

One might argue that a witches' broom is not a plant growing in the wild. I would have to agree with that statement. But once it is turned into a plant, then my statement is true. Besides, even in a garden setting, it must be cared for so that other plants would not choke it out.

In the wild, witches' brooms sometimes produce viable seeds, and 50% of the genetics comes from the broom. The resulting seedlings have up to 50% dwarf characteristics and are "sick" plants that will not survive among their standard brethren. They will eventually be shaded into oblivion.

'Wates Golden' witches' broom

Pendulous conifers that grow prostrate or ramble up and down without showing apical dominance are "sick" plants. The "sickness" of these and the other plants discussed is a genetic "sickness" (or mutation) that works against the survival of the plant. These pendulous plants are confined to the forest's understory and will eventually die from lack of light.

"Sick" Conifers: some "sick" plants from Bob

We love our weird and unusual conifers. Colorful, dwarf, and pendulous mutations have provided so many beautiful conifers for the garden that things would be blah without them. They may be genetically "sick" plants that would disappear if growing in the forest, but that is not where we cultivate them.

Picea abies 'Gold Drift' is a "sick" plant that provided the pollen to produce 28 "sick" offspring. I accept full responsibility for adding these plants to the horticultural world. I enjoy working with "sick" conifers.

Blast From the Past: Joe Stupka

Unfortunately, I did not discover Joe Stupka until later in life (his and mine). He was from western Pennsylvania and I was from eastern Pennsylvania. My plant collecting trips were to the north, south, and east. I did not know any collectors to the west si it was not until the early 1980s that I went in that direction. Even then, I leaped over the Midwest and went to the Northwest and Oregon. Later, as the American Conifer Society grew, I got to know many collectors throughout the Midwest and then got to meet Joe. His influence is extensively felt throughout the Midwest.

Email me some stories about Joe and I'll print them in the September issue.

Unfortunately, I did not get any emails with Dennis Dodge stories. He was the Blast for July.

Joe is shown here with his original G*inkgo biloba* 'Todd' which he found as a witches' broom in a cemetery. He did seven bud grafts on this particular tree. It is described as my tree of the month.

To the right is a witches' broom on a *Picea a*bies 'Nidiformis' that Joe named 'Pine Glen'.

Retention: Requires Student Parking Areas at the Middle School

The teachers, the curriculum, and the middle school philosophy were all in place to serve the 6th, 7th, and 8th-grade students attending Keithley Middle School. After moving through these three grades, they went to neighboring Washington High School. It is too bad that this educational process did not function as planned.

The limited interaction between the high school and middle school teachers was not positive. Usually, it was unhelpful with the high school teachers complaining that the incoming ninth graders were not prepared to be successful at the high school level. The district reassigned underperforming high school teachers to the middle school, compounding the issue. There they became resentful members of the faculty who were ill-prepared to work with these younger students. I worked with several teachers who fit this category.

The middle school philosophy sounds great, but it is expensive to institute and maintain. It soon becomes a jumble of middle school and junior high school programs. Then when the students hit the high school with its stricter approach, the failure rate is excessive by a wide margin.

I became tired of hearing how students are pushed through middle school, passing from grade to grade, no matter how many classes they fail. Keithley Middle School retained students at a grade level until they passed their required courses in the old system. Sometimes the joke we call summer school served to provide some passing grades. Then, of course, the school eventually awarded something called social promotion. That way, students would not be old enough to drive or shave while still in middle school.

Retention is generally more of a punishment program than an assistance program. It does not have anything to help the student pass a failed class other than just taking it over again. It assumes that the second time in a class will somehow burn the subject matter into the student's brain. However, it does help motivate the student who is afraid to repeat a grade and can be used as a "weapon" to have that student work hard enough to get a passing grade in a class. Otherwise, retention does not work.

Keeping that in mind, I proposed a transition program at Keithley for students unprepared to enter the ninth grade at Washington High School. I convinced the two principals to adopt it on a trial basis. Throughout the year, the eighth-grade students knew their transition status. The following September, transition students attended Washington High School on a different schedule from the high school students. The transition teacher determined when a student was ready to enter the regular ninth grade. Any student who could/would not be successful was returned to the eighth grade or sent to an alternative school. It depended upon the student.

The hardest part of this transition program was finding a high school teacher for these students and an eighth-grade teacher who could administer the middle school part of the program. One of our teachers, Madeline, administered the middle school part of the program by giving up some of her planning time in exchange for a stipend (salary). Another eighth-grade teacher, Theresa, volunteered for the high school part of the program and moved to a classroom at Washington High School. The program only lasted for two years. I believe the high school considered it too difficult to administer without some significant changes. When Theresa resigned from the district, the program just died. Finding a high school teacher to manage such a program is nearly impossible. It is hard to locate high school teachers who enjoy working with ninth-graders, let alone transition-level students. Many teachers consider those assignments as demotions.

Nevertheless, a transition program is needed for any middle school sending its students to a high school. Universities have a program to transition entrants from high school to college. It is called a community college or prep school. Students who are deficient in some coursework can fix those deficiencies there. Until such a thing is in place in public schools, first-year students will have high failure rates, especially the ones who attended middle school.

Conifer of the Month: *Pseudotsuga menziesii* 'Graceful Grace'

This selection, *Pseudotsuga menziesii* 'Graceful Grace' is perhaps the most distinctive of the many weeping forms of Douglas fir. Its branches hang along the main trunk while the leader grows irregularly upward, making a very irregularly upright tree. Growing up to 1 foot (30 cm) per year, its foliage is blue-green with exceptionally long, curved needles. It was found in 1968 by Albert Ziegler as he was purchasing Christmas trees at a plantation for the tenants at the Masonic Home in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. One of the trees was a nice weeping form. He showed it to Layne Ziegenfuss who convinced him to let it stay until it was propagated. Ziegler named it for his wife when it was introduced. The following year Ziegler found *Pseudotsuga menziesii* 'Little Jon' in the same way.

Unfortunately, the original tree was removed to make way for a road expansion on the Masonic Home property.

Original tree above and left.

Right: A specimen growing at the Oregon Garden

Ginkgo biloba 'Todd'

Classified with the conifers as a gymnosperm, *Ginkgo biloba* 'Todd' was found as a witches' broom in a cemetery by Joe Stupka. When he discovered it, he did grafts of individual buds to build a quicker inventory of plants. It is compact and produces leaves that are tubular, partly tubular, and split leaves. It is a short-branched, male tree.

The plant shown here was growing at Rich and Susan Eyer's former nursery: Rich's Foxwillow Pines near Woodstock, Illinois.

American Conifer Society National Meeting in Cincinnati this past June

Thecla and I drove from Puyallup to Cincinnati this past June for a weekend with fellow conifer enthusiasts. We saw some great gardens and had a restful trip across the West. We revisited the Badlands of South Dakota and enjoyed the Big Sky of Montana. We even made a stop at Little Big Horn Battlefield, a place that figures strongly in my second historical fiction novel.

Here are some pictures from our trip and the meeting.

Last Stand Hill

American Conifer Society National Meeting in Cincinnati this past June

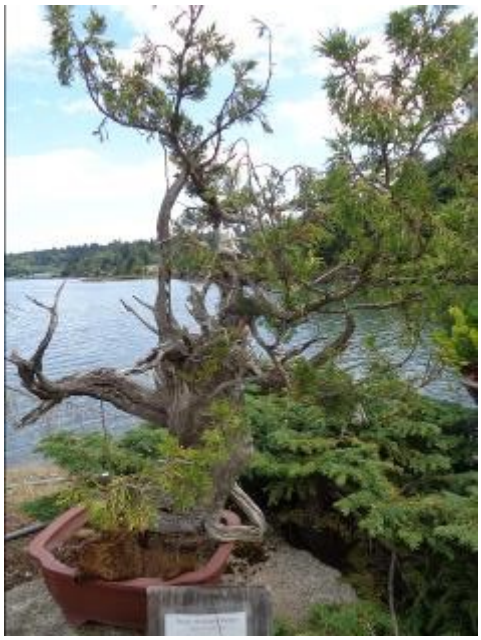
Good food is a priority

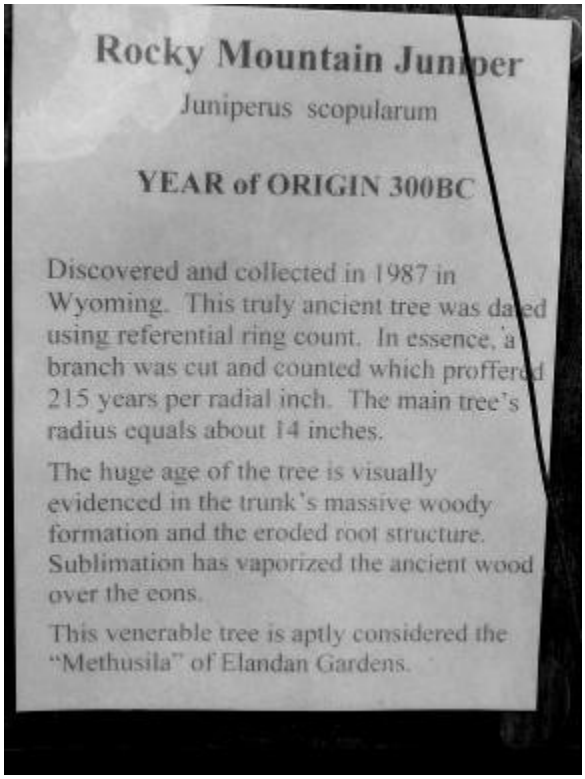
A few of the auction plants

Knees at Spring Grove Cemetary

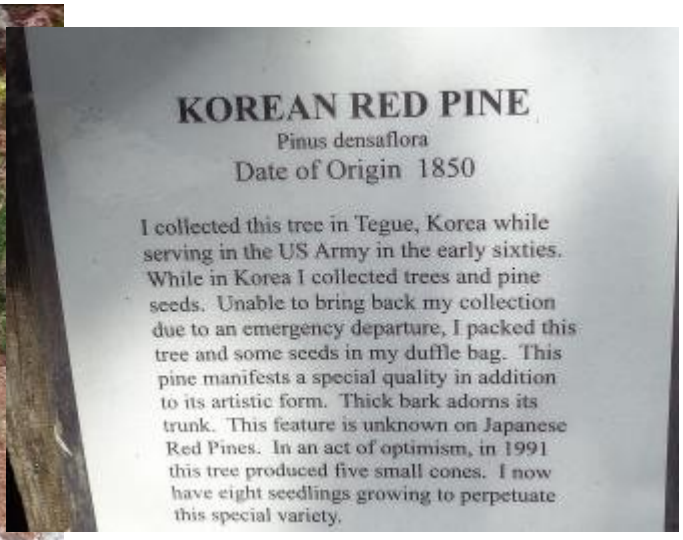
August 10 Western Regional Meeting: Elandan Gardens

Tour starts at 9:00 after donuts, bagels, and coffee.
Sign up at the ACS web site or contact me before August 5 if you prefer to "pay at the door".
3050 State Highway 16 W, Bremerton, WA 98312





August 10 Western Regional Meeting: Coenosium Rock Garden



August 10 Western Regional Meeting Part Two: Coenosium Rock Garden

Lunch followed by a presentation on the Coenosium Rock Garden by Bob Fincham.

Then tour the Coenosium Rock Garden and the Seattle Chinese Garden followed by a rare conifer auction.

$20.00 fee covers all expenses at both sites, even the donuts from Happy Donuts in Puyallup.

Walk-ins are welcome, but contact me before August 5 so we get a correct number of lunches.

6000 16th Ave SW, Seattle, WA 98106

August 10 Western Regional Meeting: Part Two Coenosium Rock Garden

Some Humor

Organization

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New dog cross breeds The following new cross breeds are now recognized by the Kennel Club - allegedly!

Collie + Lhasa Apso
Collapso, a dog that folds up for easy transport.

Pointer + Setter
Poinsetter, the traditional Christmas pet.

Pekingese + Lhasa Apso
Peekasso, an abstract dog.

Irish Water Spaniel + English Springer Spaniel
Irish Springer, a dog fresh and clean as mountain air.

Terrier + Bulldog
Terribull, not a good dog.

Bloodhound + Labrador
Blabador, a dog that barks incessantly.

Malamute + Pointer
Moot Point, owned by...oh, well, it doesn't matter anyway.

Collie + Malamute
Commute, a dog that travels to work.

Deerhound + Terrier
Derriere, a dog that's true to the end.

Bull Terrier + Shitzu
You figure this one out

Ready to Print

I recently had a cover done for my Civil War novel. I will decide this Fall whether to self-publish this book through KDP or chase after a traditional publisher. Either way, the book is done. I will publish some more segments in future issues of this newsletter.

Volume Two will be coming next year. I put it onto the back burner until I finish a mystery novel I am writing that has a real twist to it.