

PLANT OF THE WEEK

December 18, 2009

Blue Atlas Cedar *Cedrus atlantica*

We have a young Blue Atlas Cedar growing in a sunny area that had been a problem site for me from my first days here at the Garden. Those of you who have visited us here know that a too-large part of our surroundings is the old Winchester Repeating Firearms Factory, due west of our gate. This derelict hulk of a building is a great example of potential modified by reality. Four stories tall with a courtyard to increase exposure to the out of doors, the structure is for sale at a bargain price to someone who can develop it. The potential for a mixed-use facility, with condos, shops and offices is high, as Yale's campus moves towards the north: two new residential colleges, the new health center, the existing offices at 25 Science Park among other developments. But the reality is that the building is a hulking remediation site, with lead at least a prominent pollutant. This is not to say that something can't be done, but that in the present economic climate, there is little push for such a high initial outlay.

So we have to plant evergreens to block the view as best we can. There are several large Pines and Hemlocks in that general area, but as they are nearing senescence, new younger trees must be in the ground to take the place of the older ones. A stable population in other words.

This so-called stable population is just what the forester and especially the urban forester try to attain. As older trees die and have to be removed, new ones are already there to replace the shade, the carbon-fixing, the pollution abatement and the many other advantages that a tree provides.

Blue Atlas Cedar is a variety of Atlas Cedar, *Cedrus atlantica*. This member of the Pine family (Pinaceae) is native to the Atlas Mountains of Algeria and Morocco, where it grows at elevations of 4200 to 6500 feet above sea level, often in forests with *Abies numidica* (Algerian Fir), *Quercus ilex* (Holm Oak), junipers of various types and other plants. The species has dark to medium green needles, while the glaucous or blue varieties have a blue-gray to bluish-silver cast to them. This species is listed by some as a sub-group of the Lebanese Cedar (*C. libani*), and indeed there is very little difference morphologically. With the advancements in genetic testing moving forward, we should be able to answer that question in the near future.

This tree grows at a moderate to fast rate as a young plant, but slows significantly as it gets into its middle age. Eventual size will reach 50-60 feet in cultivation, though much taller specimens are found especially in Great Britain where one-hundred-footers are not uncommon. As a young plant, it is a narrow pyramidal shape, but the top widens and flattens as it ages. The spread can be almost as much as the height in an older tree. When given enough room to grow and spread, the tree is as good as it gets for evergreen specimens.

Atlas Cedars, Cedar of Lebanon and the Deodar Cedar are all closely related, but it is the Atlas Cedar that you find most in cultivation and available from nurseries. This is partly due to the faster growth as a young plant, but also their ability to live in hot and dry locations, on less-than-perfect soils. All of the true Cedars (as opposed to *Juniperus virginiana*, which is called the Eastern Red-Cedar, but is not related) By the way, I would love to find a Cedar of Lebanon to add to our collection. If you know of a purveyor with one available, do drop a line.

The blue or glaucous types are just one of the variations in Atlas Cedars. There are weeping types (there is one in a yard near the entrance of East Rock Park), varieties with golden-needles, and weeping blue types. My advice is to treat them as specimens, and don't overplant. I have seen a few lawns with several weeping

type trees, and it makes you wonder about the mental outlook of the designer.

I would like to add that I adhere to Vincent Kay's suggestions for the Winchester factory: raze it and build a peace monument or park. For the opening, invite representatives of every constituency that a Winchester was aimed at (tribes of First Americans from the Plains, Germans, Japanese, you name them, we should invite them), and let the healing begin.

In closing, I would like to wish you all a Merry Christmas, Happy Hanukkah, or Perfect Pagan Holiday among many others whichever you celebrate. Remember to be less caught up in the commerce of the moment and mindful of the connections that help us be human. I will take the next two weeks off to recharge my batteries and get ready for a new year of plant of the week columns.

Your friend,
Eric



This image shows our young Blue Atlas Cedar three years after planting. It was not a foot high when I put it in the ground. It has done very well, and seems to like its location.



A close-up of the foliage shows the whorled-arrangement of needles along the stem. This is distinctive to all of the Cedars.

Liquid Sunshine and Plant of the Week are written for e-mail readers on average of once a week. The opinions and views expressed herein are the sole responsibility of the author. Yale University and Marsh Botanical Garden are not responsible for the inane and sometimes off the chart craziness of this publication. Contact us at: eric.larson@yale.edu or at (203) 432-6320.