

THE STORY OF PLANTS: SITKA SPRUCE

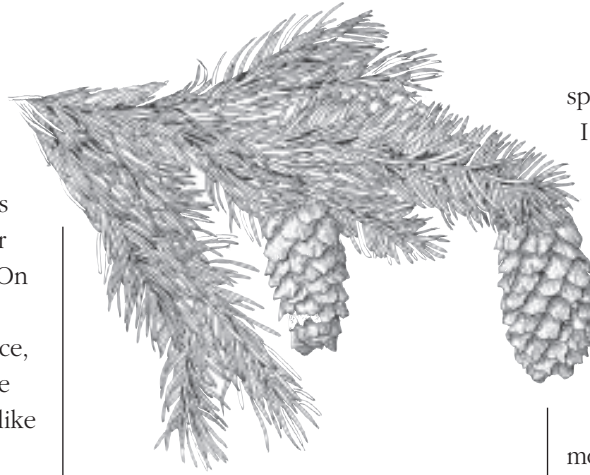
DANIEL MOUNT / ILLUSTRATION BY SYLVIA PORTILLO

REMEMBER SUMMER?

Or, do you believe like Annie Dillard that "... summer itself were a mirage, a passive dream of pleasure, itself untrue." One hot, sleepless night last summer I walked down our dark country road, finding no relief. On that moonlit walk I looked up at the magnificent silhouette of a Sitka spruce, *Picea sitchensis*. The limbs, raised like victor's arms draped with branchlets like sheets of rain, made me realize how much I missed the rain.

Sitka spruce's range from Alaska to northern California never meanders far from the cool, foggy, and often rainy Pacific Coast. Snoqualmie Valley, where I live, hosts one of the few inland populations. Before moving here I had only known it as the homely, monstrously burlled coastal tree, or as a towering behemoth among the cedars, Douglas firs, and hemlocks in the Hoh Rain Forest. I saw no garden-worthy qualities in it. Yet the silhouetted tree was so graceful and majestic I felt I was seeing the species for the first time.

Sitka spruce is the tallest spruce of the 35 or so species of spruce around the Northern Hemisphere. Reaching up to 300 feet, it is also in the top five tallest trees in the world. It has the thin, scaly bark and prickly needles typical of spruces. At first overlooked by Northwest loggers, Sitka spruce, with its strong, lightweight, and flexible wood, was heavily logged in the last century to build planes for the U.S., Britain, and France during World Wars I and II. It has since played a large role in the Alaskan economy, and has also become the favorite plantation tree in the British Isles. Now it is grown for the superior quality pulp it produces, and the clear resonant wood



Picea sitchensis

used in sounding boards for musical instruments, among other things.

Northwest natives have a long history of medicinal, culinary, and utilitarian uses for it. Most famous are the beautiful Haida and Tlingit spruce root baskets and hats. They also believe the prickly foliage banishes negative thoughts. Masked dancers shaking limbs at the audience "scare" away negativity.

A week before my deadline for this publication I ran into Jim Fox at the Miller Library. I had yet to find a reason to recommend this tree to gardeners. I had hoped, coming from Alaska, where Sitka spruce is the state tree, he might have a wonderful story, like he often does, about it. Yet his quizzical look merely scratched my own thin scaly bark to reveal the prickly nervousness I was feeling about my choice.

MORE ON SITKA SPRUCE

- *The Golden Spruce: A True Story of Myth, Madness and Greed* by John Vaillant. This book is not only informative but also a good mystery. I highly recommend it.
- Coenosium Gardens (www.cnos.biz) is a great source for *Picea sitchensis* cvs.

I know most of you don't have the space to plant a fast growing Sitka spruce. I also know there are much better spruces for the garden like the gracefully narrow Serbian spruce (*P. omorika*), any of the innumerable cultivars of Norway spruce (*P. abies*), Caucasian spruce (*P. orientalis*), or the dramatically weeping Oregon native Brewer's spruce (*P. breweriana*), which Hillier calls "the most beautiful of spruces."

But with a great deal of genetic diversity within the species *P. sitchensis* also has some cultivars. About six are available. The most popular is 'Papoose' a silvery hedgehog of a shrub. 'Bentham's Sunlight', a cultivar of the legendary golden spruce of the Queen Charlotte Islands [see inset], is unique in preferring shade. The lesser known 'Thomas' and 'Strypemonde' are slow growing dwarves for the patient enthusiast.

While I was writing this in November I took a break from the keyboard and wandered down our rain polished road. It was another one of those days when I doubted I'd ever see the sun again. The clouds had begun to thin but not break. When I reached the Sitka spruce pearly with droplets, I stopped. Like Annie Dillard, "I saw the tree with the lights in it." Each droplet drew from a sun I could not see, banishing my negativity.

And I knew, eventually, it would be made visible again. 🌞

Read more of Daniel's thoughts on plants and gardening on his blog www.danielmountgardens.blogspot.com.

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