February Hort Report

Today I’m talking about conifers, and I have three branches with three very different pinecones. The small pinecone with flat scales is from a tree I’ve never seen before, although at first glance it resembled a Mesasequoia. It had similar reddish bark, with the trunk buttressed at the base. And its needles had all dropped off, like the deciduous Mesasequoia. I was surprised to discover it was a Sequoia sempervirens, a tree usually found only in the Pacific Northwest, near the ocean. Its common name is Coast Redwood, and it’s the world’s tallest tree. This specimen was about 60 feet tall, but it can grow well over 300 feet tall. Sempervirens means ‘evergreen’, and this tree was bare. The tree is obviously stressed at being out of its proper environment, but the fact that it’s so tall means it recovers each spring, and grows new needles.

The next tree drew my attention because of the unusual pinecones. It has trident shaped bracts that are much longer than the scales, so they really stand out. This evergreen tree has flat needles, so I started investigating it by looking first at the firs. This tree’s common name is Douglas-fir, but the hyphen indicates it’s not really a fir. It’s Pseudotsuga menziesii, and it’s the second tallest tree, reaching 300 feet, and also a native of the Pacific Northwest The tree that produced these cones is only 25 to 30 feet tall.

My next branch has small, almost round cones, with reflexed scales that are almost flower-like in appearance. I thought I knew this tree, the Larch, but discovered there are many species of Larches, including American, European, and Japanese. This is the Japanese Larch, Larix kaempferi. Its needles grow in clusters, and it turns a brilliant yellow in autumn before the needles fall. It’s another one of the few deciduous conifers.

Small seeds, with or without ‘wings’, depending on the genus, grow between the scales, and I’ve an example to pass around.