

2013
January Plant of the Month



Atlantic White Cedar
***Chamaecyparis thyoides* (L.) B.S.P.**

One of the characteristic plants of New Jersey's natural wetland forests is Atlantic White Cedar, *Chamaecyparis thyoides*. This tree is a denizen of the wettest of wetlands, occupying saturated mucks along all of the Atlantic Ocean draining stream systems. The tree once grew throughout the State, but today is considered a Coastal Plain tree with only a few scattered remnant sites in the northwestern part of the state. The Atlantic white cedar is distinguished from eastern red cedar by a rounded scale, a dry rounded cone, and a freshwater wetland habitat. Red cedar can be found uplands or on saline coastal islands.

The modern conception of this tree and its habitat is far from how it once grew. We see the Atlantic white cedar growing in the heart of the Pine Barrens, forming a dense stand along most of the Mullica, Wading and Great Egg Harbor river systems. It was not this way only a short time ago. Some of the least likely site for cedar is the Hackensack Meadowlands and the shore of the Delaware River. Today, Hackensack Meadowlands is a common reed grass dominated brackish marsh. Before the European colonization of the Hudson River valley, this tree occupied those sites where we see today with a daily tidal flux. The same can be said about the Delaware River colonies. Today they reduced to one small cluster in a spot, coincidentally, called Cedar Swamp in Gloucester County. Farming, over harvesting and changing climate and hydrology has limited our best stands to the Coastal Counties of Salem, Cumberland, Gloucester, Atlantic, Cape May, Burlington, Ocean and Monmouth.

Atlantic white cedar forms dense nearly monotypic stands with a dense stem per acre count that rival any other North American tree. Its dark and damp sub-canopy with scattered gaps provides habitat for many other species, including curly grass fern, pitcher plant and swamp pink. The wood has been sought after since its discovery. It has been important for ship building, roofing and siding, building lumber and of course decoy carving. The Barnegat and Tuckerton schools were once the best of the decoy carvers depended on the readily available supply of white cedar to make the working duck and shorebird decoys. Names like Birdsall, Johnson, Hance, Grant, and Hankins grace Barnegat Bay style cedar decoys while Shourdes, Truax, Lippincott and Smith are associated with the Tuckerton carvers.