

CRYPTOMERIA Japonica: Evergreen and Ever Lovely

by Shirley Priest

Years before I ever saw the elegant Cryptomeria Japonica, I had read about it in Walter Reeves' Gardening in Georgia. Extolling the virtues of this beautiful evergreen, he recommended wider use of this hardy tree in landscapes, but noted that the name sounded somewhat like a "code-breaking tree." When I actually saw this marvelous tree for the first time, I could hardly take my hands away from its supple fronds, the name notwithstanding. The rich, blue-green needle fronds are pliant and gentle to touch, and the fragrance is delicate, but fresh and woody. It is, after all, a cedar and is also referred to as Japanese cedar. It was love at first sight for me.

A symmetrically growing tree, the Cryptomeria Japonica grows upright and has an elegant pyramidal form until it matures, where the treetop becomes more oval. A Japanese cedar alone can make a bold statement in the home landscape as a specimen, and this tree lends itself as a beautiful screen for unsightly views, as well as a screen for high winds. The bright green foliage makes a stunning backdrop for smaller blooming trees or flowers. In winter, the foliage bronzes up, and the peeling, reddish-brown bark is always attractive.

At the time of my discovery, cryptomerias only came, to my knowledge, in the giant economy size (20-60 feet tall, 10-20 wide), but I bought one anyway. I brought it home and planted it in a very large pot where it remains today, despite two years of drought and two of heavy rains. Also, I have observed these trees around the city for at least five years, and it seems their beauty belies their incredible toughness. They are hardy throughout Zones 6, 7, and 8. Most cultivars like full sun, but some of the newer cultivars grow well in partial sun. They even thrive in our acid soil.

For some years now, I have seen them used more frequently in sunny home and commercial landscapes. Landscape designers have chosen them, also, for decorative green spaces throughout the metro area. Even Smyrna's garden in the roundabout has Japanese cedars.

Not only are they used more these days, but the cultivars have increased. Medium sized, dwarf, and miniatures have made their welcome debut, and home gardeners are the beneficiaries. 'Black Dragon' has appeared. Unlike earlier cultivars, it grows 5-8 feet tall and will be perfect for container plantings. Its dark, blue green foliage almost looks black, and its cylindrical shape will add elegance to any garden. Using this cultivar will add a varied color, texture, and form to your landscape.

'Yoshino', a cultivar growing to 40-60 feet, is a highly recommended specimen tree. Its beautiful light emerald green foliage appears whorled when observed from a distance. It should grow to 10-25 feet wide, so its size can work in many

home landscapes. During the holidays, the 'Yoshino' looks stunning when decorated with white lights.

No room even for a small tree? 'Globosa Nana' grows only to 3 feet tall and wide. Its soft green foliage in summer gives way to a rusty red appearance in winter. This beautiful dwarf looks like a green fountain with white tips as the light hits its needled fronds and it will grow in sun or part sun. The color and texture will add pizzazz to any garden area.

A coarser textured dwarf is the 'Gyokuryu', and it is a quite a vigorous grower compared to other cryptomerias. This globe-shaped, low growing (3 feet tall) shrub has an open center and produces fewer cones, but the red-brown cones are attractive and small. This cultivar also grows in sun and semi-shade. Because of its beautiful color, it would be a refreshing choice to use with darker green shrubs in your landscape.

'Lobbii Nana' grows upright to 6-8 feet tall with tight, dense foliage. A slow grower, this cultivar could add just the right height for an existing area, or you may want to use it along with other dwarf cryptomerias, cypresses, and arborvitae to create a small conifer garden in the corner of your property. The 'Jindai Sugi' with its irregular, curving branches and open interior would be a perfect companion.

The window of opportunity for planting evergreen shrubs and trees this fall is closing fast. If you would like to add texture, varied colors and shapes, height and fragrance to your garden, go to your favorite nursery today just to see the enchanting cryptomerias.

