

Wellesley College Conifer Reference Garden – Established in 2007

Text and Photos by Mary D. Coyne

Sometimes the path to a Conifer Reference Garden is circuitous. Here at Wellesley College, it started with my retirement after 32 years of teaching biology (not botany!) and my subsequent entry into the Landscape Design Certificate Program at Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University. The death of a well-known and much-beloved Wellesley faculty member, Dr. Harriet Creighton, whose passion was teaching everyone about botany, left us searching for an appropriate memorial. Re-working my landscape design assignment for a rock garden, I presented a proposal for an educational garden. Dr. Creighton's companion of many years was delighted with the drawings and detailed description and provided lead funding for the project.

And so was born the idea for what

became the Creighton Educational Garden located along the pathway leading to the College's greenhouses and opposite Botanic Gardens' Visitor Center. The garden design, which included a new retaining wall and stone steps with a wide viewing platform (and favorite lunch spot), turned into an educational experience for all those who worked to bring it into reality. For the retaining wall, in consultation with Geology faculty at the college, we chose old weathered, locally appropriate field stones capped with bluestone for safety reasons, as the first thing visiting children do is walk on the wall. The stairs provide an appropriate portal to the adjacent Alexandra Botanic Garden and Hunnewell Arboretum, easily seen from the Visitor Center as the direction to

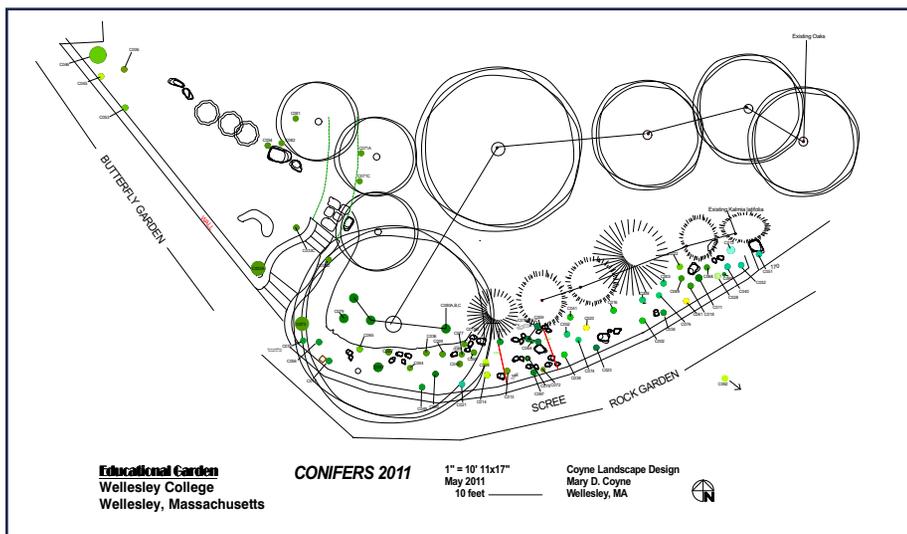


The Conifer Reference Garden as it looked early in the Spring 2011

proceed to the Botanic Gardens.

Three foci resulting from three different sun/shade patterns define the educational garden, which has a very large old oak towering above a substantial part of it. The first is a rock/scree garden using a number of alpine plants, both herbaceous and woody, showing the acclimation of plants to their microenvironments. The second is a prairie meadow area geared to supporting the life cycle of resident butterflies. This area contains many native perennials. The third focus, the conifer reference garden, is spread across both these areas but is concentrated in the rock garden/scree

area. Because of the height of the garden above a three foot wall, dwarf and miniature conifers are the primary subjects – an appropriate choice since Professor Creighton's area of expertise was genetics and these special conifers in the reference garden are genetically interesting. Students and visitors can compare these specimens with standard size related conifers in the adjacent arboretum and botanic gardens. Many of the dwarf and miniature conifers are distributed throughout the garden area to provide structure, winter interest, and continuity to the garden as a whole. Inherent in the design is seasonal interest for passers-by



This landscape is part of the Scree

particularly during the academic year from September to June. This includes conifers of various colors, shapes and sizes, demonstrating the possible use of small conifers in residential gardens, along with spring and fall bulbs and a variety of rock garden plants with differing foliage and flower colors, sizes and shapes.

When this garden was first designed, I knew practically nothing about conifers. I spent the winter perusing books, visiting web sites, plotting sizes, shapes and colors over and over again. It finally began to sink in. At New England Grows, Larry Stanley of Stanley & Sons, Inc. suggested we join the American Conifer Society and establish a Conifer Reference Garden. After becoming a member of the Society, I was directed to Jerry Kral and Elmer Dustman, who both went over my plans and plant choices and provided helpful suggestions. We obtained the bulk of conifers from Stanley & Sons (about 40 plants) with the rest coming from other nurseries. There are some plants on the list still missing, but I have discovered that is half the fun – trying to find the rest.

The majority of the conifers were planted in the spring of 2007. The garden at present contains 62 different conifers representing 7 families and 15 genera of conifers, which added 2 new genera and 14 new species to the overall collection in the Botanic Gardens. Other gymnosperms have also been included, such as: *Ginkgo biloba* Witch's Broom and *Ephedra minima*. The Reference Garden also contains a specialized area called an 'alpine scree' where the soil is composed of 2/3 pea stone and 1/3 compost/sand to a depth of 18 inches. Several conifers were planted in this area, along with nu-



Pinus strobus 'Soft Touch' by stairway corner

merous alpine plants, to test their resilience in such a sparse, well-drained soil. The conifers survived successfully for the first four years (100%) but this spring I lost 10 conifers, mostly *Picea* and mainly from the scree area. I am surmising that the hot, dry summer followed by a very cold winter was the cause even though the garden is out of the drying wind, has good drainage and had a consistent snow pack over the winter.

This loss of plants brought me to a new realization – why I belong to the Conifer Society and go to the meetings. I



Two pines as corner posts for the stairway.
Pinus densiflora 'Jane Kluis' and *Pinus strobus* 'Soft Touch'

was able immediately to replace the defunct conifers because I had squirreled away a number of plants in my own garden. These were plants I was tempted into bidding for at the meetings, as well as a number of unusual plants that were two-year grafts courtesy of Marvin Rimpler, who facilitated ordering them a couple of years ago. The motto – be prepared.

In summary, the walled area containing the reference garden has become a favorite passageway for faculty, students and visitors – a place where people gather, sit, study and browse. There are colorful conifers during the dreary winter months, a sequential blooming of various bulbs and rock garden plants during the spring and fall, and an abundance of flowers in the butterfly garden during the summer. Since the visitor center, greenhouses



Picea pungens 'Glauca Prostrata', *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Baby Ice Blue', *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Gold Fern'

Related Information

- A water supply was carried to the top of the embankment and this supply is connected to the drip irrigation and a separate hose for occasional hand watering. The irrigation system is drained for the winter.
- Drip irrigation is divided into 3 sections in order to maintain water pressure. A blue sprinkler is included in each section to indicate a functioning pressure and to remind workers to turn off the system at the end of the day.
- The greenhouse personnel oversee watering in the summer and help with some of the maintenance.
- Friends of Horticulture volunteers are responsible for regular maintenance and planting.
- A wooden box for brochures is incorporated into the edge of the garden.
- A listing of conifers and rock garden plants is available in the Visitor's Center
- Professional signs were made for each original conifer with a second round of signs slated for this spring.
- The conifers, rock garden plants and bulbs are mapped on different layers of a CAD program as well as listed in an Access database. The inventories are updated about twice a year.
- Yearly photographs are taken of individual conifers.



Ephedra minima

and educational garden are clustered together, visitors migrate easily from one place to the other. Weekends are particularly busy with families and photographers walking along the wall getting close up views of all the conifers and companion plants. At first, the garden looked somewhat sparse, but I would say that, this spring, the garden has finally come into its own.

The Wellesley College Botanic Gardens' Conifer Garden was accepted as a Conifer Reference Garden by the Northeast Region of the American Conifer Society in 2007, and the Society provided funds for additional conifers, signage, drip irrigation, brochures and student help. The Garden is used by students in horticulture, ecology and environmental studies programs, by the Friends of Horticulture docents for tours and talks, and in their Botanical Art program, and is open to the public 365 days of the year. For further information contact Mary D. Coyne, Ph.D., Professor Emerita (mcoyne@wellesley.edu) or Kristina N. Jones, Ph.D., Director of Botanic Gardens (kjones@wellesley.edu).



Sciadopitys verticillata 'Mecki'



Chamaecyparis pisifera 'Gold Pin Cushion' in foreground. *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Fern Gold' behind and *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Reis Dwarf' far right



Picea orientalis 'Skylands Prostrata'

Northeast Region Report

by Richard Dube



Garden of Robin Coleburn,
Photo by Robin Coleburn

From the beautiful, refreshing shores of Lake Champlain to the verdant, tranquil hills of the Northeast Kingdom, Vermont beckons you to the Northeast Region's annual meeting on September 9th and 10th. This is the first time ever that the annual meeting and garden tours will be held in the Green Mountain State, so come and explore Vermont's timeless beauty and the creative spirit of its conifer enthusiasts. We invite you to experience the varied and conifer-rich gardens, indulge in flavorful meals and spectacular scenery, participate in spirited auctions, and learn from our guest speaker and wizened members.

Friday night our keynote speaker will be **Richard Larson**, longtime ACS member and plant propagator at the Dawes Arboretum in Ohio since 1988. The Dawes Arboretum is well-known for its extensive conifer collection. Mr. Larson's talk will focus on marginally hardy or untried conifer genera that have performed well in Ohio.

Following a hearty breakfast on Saturday, we will board buses to tour four remarkable gardens. First stop is the gardens at **Golden Apple Orchard**

which overlook Lake Champlain and the Adirondack Mountains beyond. A formal walled garden was conceived as a transitional space between the house and the studio. This main garden is a series of rooms divided by hedges with each room having a different theme. There is an herb garden with Korean boxwood hedges, a central-knot garden flanked by perennial borders, a vegetable parterre and a conifer garden, among others. Over the years, the landscape has been expanded beyond this garden to include a substantial collection of dwarf conifers. They are inter-planted with herbaceous perennials in island beds which span several acres and which define the perimeter of the lawns and the remaining orchard. Owner Robin Coleburn has spent a few weeks this spring editing crowded conifers that have outgrown their spaces and rearranging many remaining treasures with very satisfying results. Sad that there were a few sacrifices, but elated that some plants became gifts, Robin admits, "Moving 20-30 year old conifers is not a task for the weak-willed or the weak-bodied."

Next we head to **Rocky Dale Gardens**, nestled in the western foothills of the Green Mountains. In 1981, Bill Pollard and Holly Weir developed the gardens in the style of Alan and Adrian Bloom of Bressingham, England. On the north side are stunning rock ledges, covered with *Polypodium*. Bill and Holly have created large island beds around existing hazelnut shrub masses with a wide variety of perennials. There are other island borders for conifers, small trees and

shrubs. Many of these wonderful conifer specimens are 20-30 years old. With no major renovations for many years, the gardens began to outgrow themselves and new owner Ed Burke has been removing the overgrown and failing shrubs to create inspiring vistas. Visitors can now appreciate the wonderful older specimens and see all the charming new varieties and specimens that have been planted. Rocky Dale's varied selection of outstanding conifers is especially admired by gardening enthusiasts and professionals alike.



Garden of Robin Coleburn,
Photo by Robin Coleburn

The Hidden Garden of Lewis Creek Road is the lovely site of our fantastic lunch and the third garden we will visit. This garden is laid out on two levels with the upper level surrounding the house. Curving paths wind through an extensive collection of *Hosta*, shrubs and perennials, and then lead over the lawn to a sunken garden. The sunken garden, partially hidden by *Ilex* hedges and crabapple trees, has lush plantings, a contemplative pool and handsome stonework. By taking a path under a canopy of mature conifers, or walking along a path that follows a watercourse planted with ferns and flowering shrubs, members can reach the lower garden. In the lower garden, collections of heather, ornamental grasses, damp-loving

plants, conifers and water lilies have transformed a meadow into an abundant garden embracing a reflecting pond, a trout pond and a "fishing camp". This exceptional garden is one of Vermont's largest and finest private gardens.

Heading northeast past the Ben and Jerry's plant and through Stowe, we enter the "Kingdom" and arrive at our fourth amazing garden. Don Avery was first inspired by Greg Williams in the mid-1980's and began propagating and growing conifers at **Cady's Falls Nursery**. Don grafts small quantities of about 125 taxon with a special focus on the genus *Larix*. Today, conifers are an important part of the nursery's offerings, along with cold-hardy plants, which offer strong sculptural value in the landscape, and slow-growing plants for the rock garden. From diminutive rock and shady woodland to acidic bog and pond-side, the well groomed gardens contain many old specimens, including numerous dramatically sculpted weeping larch. A portion of the growing field is being transformed into an arboretum for larger plants. Whether stunningly displayed or harmoniously inter-planted, conifers play a prominent role in Cady's Falls magical display gardens.

Saturday evening brings the opportunity to outbid each other at the silent auction during social hour. As the bidding nears a frenzied end, frantic participants jostle to make final offers on coveted needle-bearing treasures. A tasty dinner followed by the exciting and high spirited live auction rounds off the evening as members creatively carry and cart off their prized coniferous winnings. Of course, to complete the weekend of total plant gratification, Sunday morning will

bring tailgate sales to help fill any vacant space left in your vehicles. For many members, the most cherished possessions are the memories of shared experiences and the opportunity to reconnect with fellow coniferites.

Start your journey early and view some of the pre- and post-gardens, or experience other pleasures northern Vermont has to offer. Enjoy a tasty treat on a trek to Stowe at the Ben and Jerry's Factory, or The Cider Mill and taste samples at the Cabot Cheese, or Lake Champlain Chocolate outlets. Quaint Stowe village offers high quality shopping, and a scenic gondola ride up Mount Mansfield inspires you with breathtaking views of the Green and White mountain ranges. Don't miss downtown Burlington and take a refreshing stroll on the boardwalk along scenic Lake Champlain. Historic Shelburne Farms, with its restored mansion inn and barns, and highly recommended Shelburne Museum, make a wonderful post-meeting excursion. Allow some extra time to make this Vermont trip an adventure beyond an inspirational meeting and garden tours, and into a stimulating weekend escape of exploration.



Rocky Dale Gardens
Photo by Ed Burke

Submitting photography to *Conifer Quarterly*:

Please keep in mind that you must have your camera set to the highest possible resolution when capturing your images/photos to be submitted to *Conifer Quarterly*. This means you will be able to take fewer images when your camera is set to take high resolution photos.

An average sized photo should be around 3-5MB (megabytes). We can always take larger files and reduce them, but not the other way around, without loss of data.

The best photos will be crisp, with a large file size and detailed because of their resolution and ready for offset printing.

Images taken at 72 dpi will not print correctly unless they are somewhere around 20" x 24". As we increase the resolution of the image, the size gets smaller.

Don't miss your *Conifer Quarterly*!

Contact the Society with your new address.

John Martin

American Conifer Society

175 Charisma Lane

Lewisville, NC 27023-9611