

# Juniper, Eastern Red Cedar

*Juniperus virginiana*

*Recently, Jennifer Gardner from the Waite Arboretum, invited me to look at some wood cut from previous years. I thought that I might see some smaller sections of trees suitable to manufacture standard samples for the IWCS (International Wood Collectors Society). Indeed I did, most of which the Woodgroup had access to some two years ago. However amongst the wood were two or three larger sections which were labelled as Juniperus virginiana. Although I had never worked it, I knew that it was a colourful and highly fragrant wood. The accompanying photos show the very weathered section, and although it did not show promise, as soon as the chain saw cut into the wood, the aroma and colour were revealed.*

*I hope that Jennifer has access to this article, for it is an opportunity to us to publicly acknowledge our appreciation for all that she has done for us over past years. She affectionally refers to us as the "Woodies", a valued relationship that has existed since the mid 1990's. It has been great pleasure to convert some of the fallen trees to utilitarian items or things of beauty. Thank you Jennifer.*

## Derivation of names

*Juniperus* – the Latin name for the Junipers  
*virginiana* – referring to its habitat i.e. the State of Virginia in the USA.

## Other Names

Pencil Cedar, Virginia Juniper, Eastern Juniper

## The Tree

A dense, slow growing conifer which may never exceed a shrub on poor soils, but typically between five and twenty metres, with a short trunk 300mm to 600 mm in diameter. It grows slowly, living up to 300 years, although the oldest tree reported in Missouri was reputed to be 795 years old. Above the short trunk, the tree has many branches which cause a myriad of knots. The bark is reddish brown and peels off in narrow strips. The foliage is composed of many flat needle like leaves, not unlike cedars. The trees are usually dioecious, i.e. separate male trees (with pollen bearing cones) and female trees bearing seed producing cones. I was always puzzled with the origin of Juniper berries which are valuable as a food spice and flavour additive to Gin. I now know that Juniper berries are the female cones of tree of this Genus. The female cones have unusually fleshy and merged scales which give it a berry like appearance. It is thought that this is the only spice derived from conifers.

The tree has a high reputation for its fire resistance. It should be emphasized that it is not a Cedar, but is a Juniper. This is another example of difficulties with common names. Western Red Cedar is a well known and valuable tree from North America, but is not related to Eastern Red Cedar. Western Red Cedar belongs to a different Genus and is *Thuja plicata*.



## Habitat

The eastern half of North America, including Canada.

## Timber

The timber has narrow whitish or light cream sapwood. The heartwood often has many small knots and varies from dull red to a bright pinkish red, sometimes brownish red but can have a purplish hue. The wood is highly aromatic and those fortunate enough to work it have been able to enjoy the fragrance in their sheds for some time. It has a fine texture and works very well. The grain is usually straight but because of the numerous knots can often be very figurative and colourful. The timber is moderately light, having an air dried weight of about 500 kilograms per cubic metre – similar to that of Radiata Pine. My limited experience shows that it is quite stable and my further reading indicates that the shrinkage rates are quite small and the timber is therefore quite stable.



Juniper is considered a durable timber and is commonly used as fence posts in the USA. As a tree, it has a low resistance to fire, probably due to its thin bark as well as its resinous nature. Because the aromatic wood is avoided by moths it has been used for blanket boxes and clothes closets. In the past it was a choice timber for making pencils (thus pencil cedar). The durability of the timber has made it valuable for wooden buckets (before plastic I assume) and for shingles, posts, poles and small boat construction. Cedar leaf oil distilled from the leaves and is used in medicine. Oil distilled from the wood is used in the manufacture of some perfumes.



It is difficult to obtain large sizes in the US and it would be a rare timber in Adelaide, only being planted in some gardens. However the timber is precious and is excellent for turning and other craft work. If members have a chance of obtaining some they should jump at it.

*Ron Allen*