

# The False Cypresses

by Dr. Bert Cregg

So far in the *Conifer Corner* series I've grouped the trees for discussion by genus such as the pines (*Pinus*) and the spruces (*Picea*). In the next two installments of *Conifer Corner* we'll take a step back and discuss an entire family—the *Cupressaceae*, or cypress family.

Most of the members of the *Cupressaceae* are distinguished from other conifers that we are most familiar with here in Michigan by having leaves that are scale-like or flattened rather than needles. In total the cypress family includes about 40 genera; some are familiar such as *Chamaecyparis*, *Thuja*, and *Juniperus* while others are fairly obscure or found only in the southern hemisphere. Members of the *Cupressaceae* range from ground hugging plants such as Russian cypress (*Microbiota decussata*) and horizontal juniper to that largest (giant sequoia, *Sequoiadendron giganteum*) and tallest (coast redwood, *Sequoia sempervirens*) trees in the world. Many *Cupressaceae* species produce wood with large amounts of secondary compounds that make it fragrant and resistant to decay. Wood from these species is often used for decking and other outdoor purposes. Some examples include redwood, western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*), bald cypress (*Taxodium disticum*), and eastern red cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*).

The *Cupressaceae* also includes a wide variety of important and spectacular landscape plants. Plants in the cypress family provide as wide a range of sizes, forms, textures and colors as any group of conifers. In this and the next edition of *Conifer Corner* I will discuss several members of the *Cupressaceae* family

that are worthy of consideration for Michigan landscapes. This month's article will focus on plants commonly referred to as false cypresses and the next will focus on cedars and junipers.

Sawara or Japanese falsecypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera*) Zone 4-8

This species is native to Japan and includes a number of cultivars with outstanding ornamental characteristics. In its native habitat the species grows to be a medium to large tree (up to 120'). Cultivars may have several distinctive foliage types but the filifera or threadleaf types are the most distinctive.

Chub notes: *The pisifera are outstanding performers. The threadleaf types in particular are fantastic.*

'Filifera' (Threadleaf falsecypress)

A distinctive and dramatic landscape plant. The long thread-like leaves add a unique graceful character to the landscape.

'Filifera Aurea'

The foliage is similar to 'Filifera' but adds a distinctive glowing yellow color. Many of the "postcard" photos of conifer gardens such as Hidden Lake Gardens feature this outstanding plant. As always, the standard rule of yellow conifers applies; don't overdo it, a little goes a long way.

'Gold Spangle'

Brilliant yellow adult threadlike foliage; short, slightly twisted branches; broad pyramidal form with narrow crown as it matures; partial shade.

Chub notes: *This one is kind of a sleeper. The foliage is a mix between pisifera and a Chamaecyparis obtusa.*

'Boulevard'

A popular garden stand-by with soft, plummy, silver-blue foliage and a very full, pyramidal habit. Originated as a sport on *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Squarrosa'.

Hinoki false cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*)

Not as hardy as *C. pisifera*, this species is limited to Zones 5 and warmer (southern half of the lower peninsula). Many specimens at Hidden Lake Gardens have thrived since 1981. In contrast to the feathery appearance of the *C. pisifera* 'Filifera' cultivars, Hinoki false cypresses are compact, usually slow-growing plants. They have their own appeal, however, and make outstanding specimen plants.

'Nana Gracilis' (Dwarf Hinoki Cypress)

This is one of the most popular dwarf conifers, with good reason. It forms a dense, often globe-



*C. pisifera* 'Filifera Nana'

## Chub Notes

Justin “Chub” Harper is widely known as one of the leading experts on garden conifers in the United States. The Harper Collection of Dwarf and Rare Conifers at MSU’s Hidden Lake Gardens is nationally recognized. Each Conifer Corner includes Chub’s notes on his favorite (and not so favorite) conifers.

like bush when young, becoming more broadly conical with age. Its glossy, dark green foliage is held in thick bunches of shell-shaped sprays with silvery markings beneath.

### ‘Rigid Dwarf’

A broad upright to oval dwarf form. 3-6’ at 10 years. Chub notes: *An iron clad plant.*

### ‘Nana Lutea’

A dwarf form with bright yellow foliage. The yellow color is a blend of golden yellow foliage and white foliage, the white often being a band interior to the golden yellow.

### Lawson falsecypress or Port Orford Cedar (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana*)

Native to southwest Oregon and Northern California, this species is listed as hardy to Zone 5 but is probably best saved for protected sites. *Krussman’s Manual of Cultivated Conifers* lists over 200 cultivars. Many cultivars are selections from the cultivar ‘Elwoodii’, which is also seen in stores around Christmas as a tabletop Christmas tree.

### Atlantic White Cedar (*Chamaecyparis thyoides*)

Grows in a narrow coastal belt 50 to 130 miles wide from southern Maine to northern Florida and west to southern Mississippi.

### ‘Heatherbun’

A soft blue-green globe form turning plum purple in the winter. Zone 4.



**Chamaecyparis  
‘Green Arrow’**

### ‘Ericoides’

Becoming more common in the trade. Also a blue-green form turning bronze to purple in the winter. Zone 5.

### Nootka falsecypress or Alaska yellow cedar (*Xanthocyparis nootkatensis*)

Taxonomic controversies notwithstanding (see sidebar), this is a spectacular and fascinating tree. The species is native to the Pacific coast of North America from northern California to Prince William Sound, Alaska. Although the species is often grown in the open in landscapes, it is classified by foresters as shade tolerant. In mountainous areas of its native range it occupies

## A New Name For a Familiar Tree

In introductory plant science courses we teach that Latin scientific names are used to eliminate confusion surrounding common names. Taxonomists, however, are never finished with their work and scientific names and plant classification are subject to constant revision. For the most part, recent revisions in taxonomy are the result of advances in molecular biology and genetics and improvements in our understanding of relationships among taxa. But changes in the world’s political climate can also change the taxonomic landscape.

Recently, Daniel Harder, Director of the University of California at Santa Cruz Arboretum, and his collaborators identified a new genus and species of conifer in a remote region of northern Vietnam. The newly identified tree has both needles and scale-like leaves and produces fine-grained fragrant lumber that is highly valued by locals. The taxonomists named the new tree golden Vietnamese yellow cypress (*Xanthocyparis vietnamensis*). Interestingly, the new genus includes a second species. Nootka falsecypress or Alaska yellow cedar (formerly *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis*) has been reclassified in light of the discovery in Vietnam as *Xanthocyparis nootkatensis*. The new name better reflects the species’ relationship to its Asian cousin, however, it’s hard not to feel a sense of disappointment over the loss of *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis*, one of the all-time great scientific names. In a taxonomic domino effect, Leyland cypress, a common landscape conifer in the southern U.S., also has a new scientific name. One of the few examples of an inter-generic hybrid, this cross between Nootka false cypress and *Cupressus macrocarpa* was known as *Cupressocyparis leylandii* but is now *Cuprocyparis leylandii*. As with most changes of this type, the previous Latin name for Nootka cypress will persist in the nursery and landscape trade in the near term. The American Conifer Society and most arboreta, however, have adopted the new classification.



a unique ecological niche in avalanche chutes where it survives heavy snow loads because of its narrow, flexible crown and drooping branches. Chub notes: *It's hard to say enough good things about this tree. One of the most reliable and consistent conifers around.*

**'Pendula'**

If the straight species doesn't weep enough for you, try this pendulus cultivar. Be aware this is a large conifer, so give room. Grows up to 15' by age 10.

**'Green Arrow'**

A striking accent plant. Forms a very long, very narrow crown. It's one of those plants where there's not much middle ground. You either get excited about it or think it's a too far "out there." Discovered in British Columbia in 1980 in a forestry nursery.

**'Strict Weeping'**

Another very narrow upright form.

**'Aurea'**

Medium to large tree with dense form. Subtle variation in color, green tinged with yellow.



**Russian cypress (*Microbiota decussata*)**

This is an interesting plant in a lot of respects. The genus *Microbiota* is mono-specific, containing only this one species. It tolerates a wide range of site conditions including drought and shade. *Microbiota* forms a large, low-growing shrub that may be 20 or 30' wide but less than a foot tall. The plant has an interesting texture for a ground cover. Color turns from deep green to bronze in the winter.

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