



Chub Harper at Hidden Lake Gardens
Harper Conifer Collection.

CONIFER CORNER

Celebrating Twenty-five Years
of the Harper
Conifer Collection

*Text by Dr. Bert Cregg
Photos by Mr. Jack Wikle, except as noted.*



Chub Harper relaxes among his beloved conifers with his corgis.



The Davey Tree Company provided labor and equipment to dig over 300 conifers from Chub Harper's home in Moline, IL. Photo courtesy of Hidden Lake Gardens Archive.

The Harper Conifer collection shortly after its establishment in 1981. Photo courtesy of Hidden Lake Gardens Archive.



This past year marked the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the Justin 'Chub' Harper Collection of Dwarf and Rare Conifers at Hidden Lake Gardens, near Tipton, Michigan. The Harper collection represents one of the best and most extensive collections of unusual conifers in the United States.

And, it represents an incredibly generous donation to Michigan State University and the horticultural public in Michigan by ‘Chub’ Harper, one the leading conifer collectors and experts in the world. Today, the Harper Collection includes nearly 500 plants of conifer species and cultivars of every shape, size, and color imaginable. To honor Chub and the 25th anniversary of the Harper Collection at Hidden Lake Gardens, Jack Wikle, a fellow conifer enthusiast and Chub’s long-time friend, presented Chub with a photo album celebrating “Four Seasons of the Harper Collection”. Mr. Wikle graciously shared the digital photos with me and I am pleased to share them with you.



The bark of Tanyosho pine (*Pinus densiflora* ‘Umbraculifera’) adds year-round interest to the landscape.



Golden *Chamaecyparis pisifera* ‘Filifera Aurea’ invite visitors into the Harper Collection of Dwarf and Rare Conifers.





The Conservatory at Hidden Garden houses arid and tropical plants as well as an outstanding Bonsai collection.

Tanyosho pines (*Pinus densiflora* 'Umbraculifera') and Snake branch spruce (*Picea abies* 'virgata') are among the signature plants at the Harper Collection.



History of the Harper collection

During his working years, Justin 'Chub' Harper was the grounds maintenance supervisor for John Deere at their corporate headquarters in Moline, Illinois. Like many people that work in the green industry, Chub was also an avid gardener and soon began collecting plants. "Actually, I started with bearded irises," Chub remembers, "then I moved on to daylilies and then roses." That's when Harper bought a Dwarf Alberta Spruce. "I don't know why, but that thing just tripped my trigger," Chub confesses with a laugh. Before long, Harper had filled the lot next to his house and leased a second lot nearby to handle the overflow of dwarf and rare conifers. "I just had a natural affinity for them," he says. "Once I started, one thing led to another." Over time, Harper's collection in Moline included over 300 plants and it became apparent that the trees were going to outgrow their space in the two lots. In cooperation with Jack Wikle, then the Naturalist/Educator at Hidden Lake Gardens, and Professor Milt Baron, Chub made arrangements to donate the collection



to Michigan State University's Hidden Lake Gardens, located in the rolling Irish Hills of south-central Michigan.

The big move

In April 1981, the trees were dug from Harper's lots in Illinois. The Davey Tree Company donated labor and equipment for the move. Ralph Carmichael and Terry Jay from Davey organized the transplanting. "Space was tight, so everything had to be dug by hand," Chub recalls. "We had a crew of eight guys and it took a week to get everything dug." When all of the trees were loaded, the plants filled three semi-trucks. "I remember we were getting ready to close the door on the last truck and there was one tree leftover. We had to re-arrange nearly the whole load, but we got her on there." The transplanting of the trees to Hidden Lake Gardens went remarkably well. Chub estimates over 90% of the plants that were dug in Moline survived the digging and transplanting to Hidden Lake. "That's pretty amazing when you consider these were garden-grown plants. Unlike nursery stock, there was no root pruning or other effort to get them ready to be dug."

To the right of the two rocks: *Pinus nigra* 'Helga', Austrian Pine (between rocks); *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Mother Lode', Creeping Juniper (in the foreground); and *Picea glauca* 'Burning Well', White Spruce (behind creeping juniper).

The dramatic contrast of the Harper conifers and fall color make autumn an ideal time to visit Hidden Lake Gardens.





Hidden Lake Gardens

Michigan State University's Hidden Lake Gardens is aptly named. Nestled in the Irish Hills near Tipton, Michigan the gardens are truly a hidden gem for those who visit. While the Harper Conifer Collection is the main attraction for many, Hidden Lake Gardens boasts many additional attractions that make it a worthwhile daytrip. The 775-acre gardens include a world-class hosta collection, miles of wooded hiking trails (dogs on leashes welcome), a bonsai collection, and a conservatory featuring warm weather plants from arid and tropical regions of the world. Hidden Lake Gardens is open all year except Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. Admission is \$3 per person. Hidden Lake Gardens conducts seminars and educational programs throughout the year on various horticultural topics. For more information visit: www.hiddenlakegardens.msu.edu.

Moving the collection to Michigan was not the end of Chub's contribution to the collection at Hidden Lake. As of the latest inventory, 494 conifers are included in the collection. All told, over 700 accessions have been made to the collection. Acquiring and evaluating the collection is a never-ending and an ongoing process. Harper makes the 400 mile drive from Moline, Illinois once or twice a year to review his troops. Along with Jack Wikle and Gerry Donaldson, the Garden Foreman at Hidden Lake, he examines each bed in the collection to determine if plants are growing properly, or too much. Sometimes plants are rearranged within the collection or moved to a second collection of larger conifers at Hidden Lake Gardens. Plants that fail to perform up to expectations are removed from the collection or, as Chub euphemistically put it, "given a short ride on the chipper truck."



Angel of Hidden Lake Gardens

Over the years, a number of stories and legends have arisen regarding the Harper Collection, but the most moving and endearing is the Angel of Hidden Lake Gardens. In 2004, Chub Harper's wife Anna passed away after battling cancer. Following Anna's wishes, Chub went to Hidden Lake Gardens to scatter her ashes in their beloved collection. Along with several friends, Chub spread the ashes on a hillside overlooking the collection. As Chub and his friends began to leave, they sensed a presence behind them. As they turned around, they noticed the weeping Norway spruce behind them formed the perfect silhouette of an angel, complete with halo and wings. Several newspapers picked up the story and the legend of the Angel of Hidden Lake Gardens was born.



A continuing legacy of generosity

As further evidence of the addiction known as ACS (Acquired Conifer Syndrome), Harper began to replant his lots in Moline with new conifers. Chub laments, "By 1989, I was in trouble again for space." As in 1981, the lots in Moline were bursting at the seams with Chub's conifers. In 1990, more conifers were dug from Chub's collection. This time, the benefactor of Chub's generosity was the Heartland Collection at the Bicklehaupt Arboretum in Clinton, Iowa. In 2001, Chub finally gave up the leased lot in Moline. Chub donated the remaining conifers to the Quad City Botanical Center in Rock Island, Illinois. Chub has also donated conifers to the arboretum at Illinois






Pinus densiflora
'Umbraculifera'



Snowfall turns the Harper Collection into a winter wonderland.

Cedrus libani var. *stenocoma*, Cedar of Lebanon, covered with a beautiful mantle of snow.



Central College in East Peoria, Illinois. “At the end of the day, it’s all about education and getting people excited about these wonderful plants.” Chub continues to donate new conifers to the collection at Hidden Lake. Most of the new plants around Harper’s home today, however, are not conifers. Chub notes, “Now I’ve really lapsed into insanity, I’m collecting hostas!” 

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