

TREE OF THE MONTH – February 2012

Weeping Nootka cypress (*Xanthocyparis nootkatensis* 'Pendula')

(Formerly *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* 'Pendula')

Weeping Nootka cypress is a beautiful tree, with drooping branches that hang like falling water and light green foliage that stands out against shredding orange-brown bark. The species, *Xanthocyparis nootkatensis*, is native to the Pacific Northwest. It was first documented in 1791 by Archibald Menzies, a naturalist who visited British Columbia on two expeditions and described many of our native plants.

Nootka cypress is an unusual conifer, and since its discovery it has been bounced between several different genera in the cypress family. The species was originally named *Cupressus nootkatensis*, after the Nuu-chah-nulth or Nootka people of Vancouver Island. In 1841, it was renamed *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis*, as it is commonly known today. It has never fit well in that genus, however. Nootka cypress has cones like the true cypresses (*Cupressus*), and it has hybridized successfully with other species of true cypress (most famously with Monterey cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) to produce Leyland cypress (*x Cupressocyparis leylandii*), a popular garden conifer). On the other hand, it has flattened sprays of foliage like the false cypresses (*Chamaecyparis*) of Eastern Asia and North America. Nootka cypress seemed to be unique in the world of conifers, and for lack of a better option, this species has remained with the false cypresses for the past 160 years.

In 2002, a rare new conifer was discovered in Vietnam, the golden Vietnamese cypress. Like *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis*, it had foliage like a false cypress, and cones like a true cypress. The two species were so similar that the discoverers created a new genus just for them: *Xanthocyparis*. The two conifer species would be called *Xanthocyparis nootkatensis* and *Xanthocyparis vietnamensis*. These new names were made official in July during the 2011 International Botanical Congress in Melbourne, Australia.

Nootka cypress will likely be known as *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* in the nursery trade for a few more years, but eventually gardeners will get used to the new name, *Xanthocyparis nootkatensis*. It will be interesting to learn more about its relative, the endangered golden Vietnamese cypress, and the evolutionary history that these two conifer species share.

2015 Note: Based on more genetic research, many sources now place call this tree *Cupressus nootkatensis* 'Pendula'.