

Tree of the Month, August 2016: Nikko fir (*Abies homolepis*)

In summer, the bright green crown of Nikko fir (*Abies homolepis*) is covered in upright purple cones with glistening droplets of pitch. This is unlike most spruces, which have cones only at the very top of their crown, where they are difficult to see. The abundant, attractive cones, combined with a tolerance of air pollution and the ability to thrive in a variety of soil types, makes Nikko fir a popular ornamental conifer.

Nikko fir is native to the temperate rainforests in the mountains of Honshu and Shikoku, Japan, where it can grow to 30-50 meters tall. The common name is a reference to Nikko, a city in the mountains north of Tokyo, where the species is commonly found. The Japanese common name is *urajiro-momi*, meaning “fir tree with white undersides”, referring to the two white bands of stomata on the undersides of the needles.

The species was introduced to western horticulture in 1860 by Philipp Franz von Siebold, a German physician and botanist who worked in Japan in the 1820s. He studied the local flora and fauna and trained local physicians in western medicine, including vaccination techniques and pathological anatomy. His daughter, Kusumoto Ine, was the first female practitioner of western medicine in Japan and in 1873 she attended the birth of one of Emperor Meiji’s children. A number of Japanese native plants are named for Siebold, including Oyama magnolia (*Magnolia sieboldii*) and Japanese hemlock (*Tsuga sieboldii*). Siebold is also responsible for introducing Japanese knotweed (*Fallopia japonica*) to Europe and North America, where it has become a highly invasive weed.

At VanDusen Botanical Garden, Nikko fir can be found at the eastern edge of the Great Lawn (see map below).

