March 2020 - Hughie Jones

Picea smithiana
Morinda spruce/West Himalayan spruce

(native to the western Himalaya and adjacent mountains, from northwest Afghanistan, northern Pakistan, India to central Nepal - grows at altitudes of 2,400 - 3,600 m)

There is a lot to like about this large evergreen tree. The common name, Morinda spruce, is a good start. You also could call it Tibetan spruce or West Himalayan spruce, but Morinda spruce is the name most people favour. This name is Nepalese and means the honey of flowers. The tree's large pendulous cones are covered in golden pearls of resin - and so the very appropriate and beautiful name.

Then there is the Latin name - *Picea smithiana*. It is good to see that the species name comes from the very talented gardener, James Smith, who worked at Hopetoun House in Scotland for sixty years. He started there when he was thirteen. James Smith was the one who planted the seeds of Morinda spruce and carefully watched over them. James remained head gardener at Hopetoun until his death at seventy-three in 1850.

Just looking at the Morinda spruce is both meditative and comforting. The tree itself is shockingly unspruce like. It has long soft needles, whereas most spruce have short spiky ones. And Morinda spruce has a dramatic weeping habit with its pendulous branches. On the other hand, most other spruce species just seem to be trying their hardest to grow straight up - no weeping time or drama. And if you like comfort food - try roasting the young female cones. The central portion is sweet and syrupy.

Picea smithiana

female cone

There are a few things to worry about though. Spruce in America and Europe have been suffering from increasing temperatures for years. But now the needles of Morinda spruce in the

Himalayas are turning yellow. This gives the tree a charred look. In the last three decades temperatures have increased by 0.6 C in this region.

Large scale yellowing of this spruce is a concern. The Himalayas shape the climate regime in Asia, and forests of Morinda spruce play an important role in the hydrology of the mountain ecosystem. They play a big part in keeping native plant diversity as well.

Also, since similar patterns of dying spruce forests have been reported across the globe, spruce appears to be a potent indicator species of changing environmental conditions.

But we can hope. For thousands of years there have been sacred groves scattered throughout the Himalayas - old growth trees, healing plants, untouched waters. These sacred places are the home of the gods - no logging, no hunting, no extracting. They are regarded as 'Sacred Natural Sites' by IUCN.

Picture of Picea smithiana in bed 137M (opposite the Korean Pavillion) planted in 1984. Beds 149A and 74 each have one that was planted the same year.

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