

Tree of the Month, July 2016: Dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*)

In 1943 a Chinese forester named Wang Chan found an unusual tree at a shrine near the border of Hubei and Sichuan, China. The tree was called “the water fir” by locals, and Wang thought it might be a Chinese water cypress (*Glyptostrobus pensilis*). He collected specimens, which were analyzed by two botanists named Wu Chung-Lun and Cheng Wan-Chun, who could not match them to any known species. In 1946 Professor Hu Xiansu of the Fan Memorial Institute of Biology in Beijing was looking at these specimens and noticed that they were very similar to some fossils that had been found in 1941 by a Japanese paleontologist named Miki Shigeru. Professor Hu came to the conclusion that the living and fossil trees were the same genus, meaning that the samples were from a “living fossil”, a species that had remained largely unchanged for millions of years. It was a unique tree from the Cypress Family (Cupressaceae), so Miki, Hu and Cheng named the new species *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* after other similar members of that family: coast redwood (*Sequoia*) and Chinese water cypress (*Glyptostrobus*). *Metasequoia* means “like *Sequoia*” and *glyptostroboides* means “resembling *Glyptostrobus*”.

This “redwood from the dawn of time”, or dawn redwood, has deciduous feathery green, needle-like foliage, bark in vertical strips and distinctive armpit-like depressions at the base of branches. Fast growing, it reaches 60 m tall at maturity and can survive in standing water.

Other living specimens were eventually found in a few scattered groves in Central China, but only about 5000 trees remain in the wild today. The species is on the IUCN Red List of Endangered Species and wild trees in China are protected. Since their discovery, seeds have been collected and sent to botanical gardens and arboreturns around the world for ex situ conservation in an effort to help protect the species from extinction.

At VanDusen, dawn redwood can be found on the North shore of the R. Roy Forster Cypress Pond.

