

Tree of the Month, March 2016: Snakebranch spruce (*Picea abies* 'Virgata')

In his “Manual of Woody Landscape Plants (1998)”, horticulturist Dr. Michael Dirr describes snakebranch spruce as having a “Medusa-like beauty” that “takes getting used to”. This cultivar originated as a rare, naturally occurring mutation of Norway spruce (*Picea abies*), which is native from the mountains of northern and central Europe to the Ural Mountains of western Russia. Instead of the pyramidal shape normally seen in the species, snakebranch spruce has sparse, undulating, snake-like branches laden with clusters of long trailing branchlets. Trees with this mutation were selected and introduced to horticulture in France sometime before 1853. The cultivar name ‘Virgata’ is from the Latin word *virga*, meaning “rod”.

Small groves of spruce with the snakebranch mutation are still occasionally found in the wild but the trees are sterile so they can only reproduce vegetatively. Typically, this is by layering, a process where branches that touch the ground develop roots and eventually break away from the parent to form a separate tree. A famous stand in Hornberga, Sweden, was declared a national monument in 1977.

We have a large snakebranch spruce growing near Heather Pond (see map below).

