Calocedrus decurrens, commonly called incense cedar, is an elegant, majestic, aromatic, pyramidal evergreen conifer that is grown as an ornamental or large specimen tree. In cultivation, they typically reach heights of 50 ft. Their name comes from the Greek word *kalos* meaning beautiful and *cedrus* from Latin meaning cedar tree. Beautiful cedar is a very fitting name, but don’t be confused by the name—this isn’t a true cedar. True cedars are in the genus Cedrus. Its common name comes from having aromatic wood that smells like true cedar.

Incense cedar is native to Western North America (Oregon, Nevada, and California) where the weather typically has dry summers, wildfires, and periods of frequent drought. Incense cedar is more resistant to fire because of its thick bark, which is usually 2-3 inches thick, but on older trees may be 6-8 inches thick. It is extremely drought tolerant. In the wild, it can grow to be 150 feet and live to be over 1,000 years old. In cultivation, they typically reach heights of 50 ft. Although native to the West Coast, it also does well here in zone 6B with our summer heat and humidity.

*Calocedrus decurrens*

**Incense Cedar**

Of Chambers as the Cedars
Impregnable of eye
And for an everlasting Roof
The Gambrels of the Sky

~ Emily Dickinson

Drawing of mature tree, saplings, foliage, and cones [Matt Strieby, 2019.11]
Incense cedar has numerous attractive features. The interesting bark is thick, furrowed, a cinnamon reddish-brown color, aromatic, water resistant, and has been used to make cedar chests, fencing, shingles, and benches. It is very durable and used to make other useful items, most famously pencils.

The branchlets grow upright vertically with flattened spreading, fanlike sprays of glossy, lustrous, bright green foliage. Their needles are scalelike leaves, overlapping and elongated. The leaves have a spicy fragrance when crushed and stay that beautiful dark green color throughout the year. John Muir, known as the “Father of the National Parks” said, “The branches swoop outward and downward in bold curves, excepting the younger ones near the top, which aspire, while the lowest droop to the ground, and all spread out in flat, ferny plumes, beautifully fronded, and imbricated upon one another.” “The plumes are exceedingly beautiful; no waving fern-frond in shady dell is more unreservedly beautiful in form and texture, or half so inspiring in color and spicy fragrance.”

Incense cedar also has showy attractive cones. It is a gymnosperm and monoecious, so the male and female flowers are on the same plant. In early autumn, incense cedar begins to initiate its reproductive systems. The tips of the growing branchlets convert from vegetative to floral branches. By early winter, male or staminate cones (1) mature, and the winter winds disperse clouds of pollen, which land on female or pistillate tips. These then ripen into seed bearing cones (2) the following autumn. Female cones develop in one year, maturing by early fall. When the female cones open to release their seed, the scales of the cones are commonly described as resembling duckbills. They release winged seeds in fall that go forth and multiply. Seed dispersal may extend over a lengthy period, from late August through November or even later.