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*In our Collection*

## Dwarf Alberta Spruce

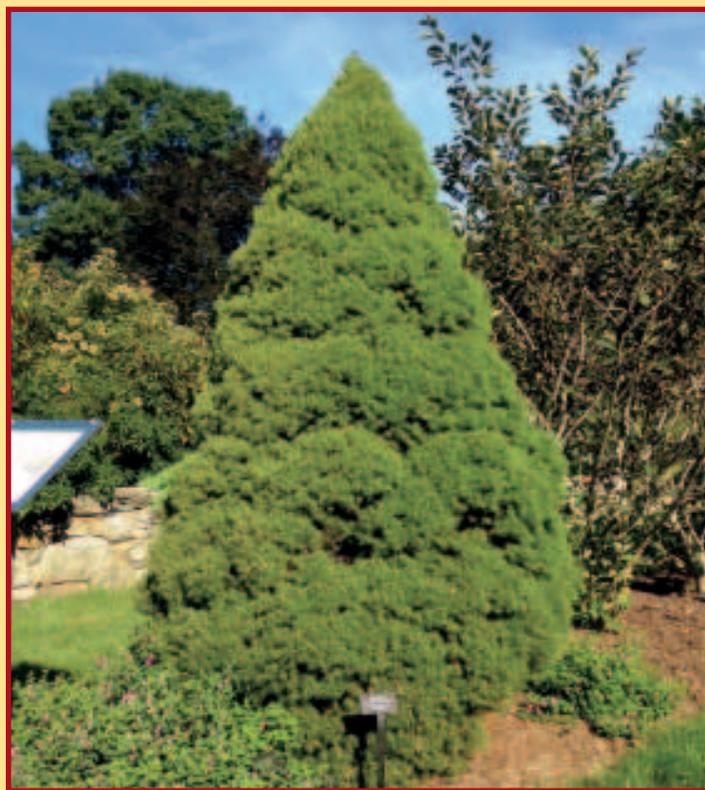
*Picea glauca* var. *albertiana* f. *conica*

Jon Hetman, *Communications and Stewardship Officer*

The discovery and introduction of *Picea glauca* var. *albertiana* f. *conica* offers a remarkable example of horticultural discovery as happenstance. In 1904, staff members Alfred Rehder and John G. Jack took a stroll while waiting at a train station near Lake Laggan, Alberta, and noticed some unusual dwarf spruces growing nearby. They speculated that a spruce with a witch's broom had dropped seeds and produced small, compact plants with tight foliage. As agents for the Arboretum, they couldn't resist collecting their extraordinary find for further study, and so the plant made the cross-continental journey to the Arboretum with them.

Thus begins the horticultural tale of one of the most familiar and conspicuous plants in cultivation—the dwarf, slow-growing evergreen known popularly as dwarf Alberta spruce. Taxonomic studies conducted by Rehder established the plant as a naturally-occurring mutant of white spruce (*P. glauca*), a noble and highly adaptable conifer with distinctive blue-green foliage that exudes a musky scent when crushed. Unlike the species—which can attain a height of more than 100 feet in the wild—this form generally remains under 10 feet, growing slowly and rather uniformly in a cone shape. Its foliage is softer and denser than typical white spruce, with needles less than ½-inch in length and light green in color. As a specimen plant, dwarf Alberta spruce has few disadvantages, rarely producing cones and amenable to creating topiary forms when grown in containers.

Although the source plant has long since perished, its genetic advantages carry on in our living collections through two 81-year-old plants growing on Conifer Path and a much younger individual



Jon Hetman

This dwarf Alberta spruce (182-2005\*A) grows in the Leventritt Shrub and Vine Collection in a bed that features a number of historical Arboretum plant introductions.

growing in the Leventritt Shrub and Vine Garden. In honoring the accomplishments of renowned Arboretum taxonomist Alfred Rehder on the sesquicentennial of his birth (see “A Life Remembered in Plants” on page 9), we remember not only his impact as a taxonomist and scholar, but the crucial role he played in the Arboretum’s introduction of myriad plant species and varieties from all corners of the temperate world. 