Western Juniper

(Juniperus occidentalis)

Where does it grow? Western juniper is a hardy tree found growing in every eastern Oregon county on arid hills and high plains. In eastern Oregon it is usually at lower elevations than pines, though there is a strip at the edge of pines where the two grow together. The juniper loves dry weather and clear blue sky more than any other Oregon tree. Irrigation or a high water table will often kill it.

Is it important? It deserves special attention for giving us forest products and shade in the high dry sections. It is widely used for posts because they last. Desert folk claim a big post will outlast two post holes. It is also used for fuel, and the wood makes the finest polished novelties and ornaments. Deer browse the lower branches of foliage of certain trees when starved in winter, but juniper is not considered good forage. For some reason, known only to the deer, certain trees may be eaten as high as the deer can reach, while other trees nearby are not touched. The reason may lie in the difference in the oiliness of the twigs. The berry-like cones are eaten by birds. The tree is highly ornamental and adorns the yards and lawns of many homes, especially in eastern Oregon.

What does it look like? Junipers may grow thirty feet high with branches all the way up and down the trunk. It is an evergreen, and the leaves are scale-like. It is difficult to describe a characteristic shape for juniper. It may be fat, thin, wide, or pointed, depending on weather, location, and inherent variations.

Gray-green foliage, made up of small, shingled scales and blue-green berries, give the tree a misty look (1 x).

Description:

Length of life -- very long. Some large junipers live over 500 years.

Height -- most trees about 20 feet, but in some areas, trees may grow to 30 or more feet. Long life and slow growth make for thick trunks that are often tortured by adversity, as though twisting and writhing in pain.
Bark -- cinnamon brown, 1/2 to 1 1/4 inches thick, firm and stringy with wide shallow furrows.

Leaves -- short, pale ashy-green, scale-like, they grow in series of three and overlap, shinglewise. The sharp tips stand out from the twigs, making a twig uncomfortable to grasp. The tips are covered with an ash-gray resin that, combined with the blue berries, gives the tree a somewhat misty appearance.

Methods of spread -- berry-like cones that are bluish black and covered with whitish powdery bloom. Each contains 2 or 3 seeds surrounded by large resin cells. The cones have a strong pungent odor and when eaten by birds or animals, will not digest, but pass on to grow in a new location. You can sometimes locate old and forgotten fences by noticing straight rows of junipers where the fences were. There are male and female trees, so some trees will have no cones.

Wood -- of every color from white to pale brown to red. It is extremely brittle, but takes a beautiful polish, and is one of America's most beautiful woods for ornamental bowls, paper weights, and other objects. Most trees have many lengthwise pockets of rot or bark, making it hard to get an unblemished board more than 3 feet long.

Does it look like anything else? Except for other native junipers, western juniper should not be confused with other trees in Oregon. It has been mistakenly called cedar and cypress, but these trees do not grow in the same area. The mountain or common juniper hugs the ground at high elevations, making a dense mat.