

# Our Friend the Douglas-fir

By Scott Laird

Living here in Vernonia we've all heard about the once magnificent old-growth stands of Douglas-fir trees that historically supported the timber industry in the region, and we see this iconic species daily in our travels. It is the state tree of Oregon and graces our motor vehicle license plate. But how much do you really know about the Douglas-fir, a tree still dependably grown by timber companies and small tree farmers, and regularly harvested by loggers? Some of you probably know a lot about this special species, but I thought we all might like to meet and learn more about this neighbor in some detail, so let me introduce you to our friend the Douglas-fir.

Let's start at the beginning. As most of us know, the tree is named after Scottish botanist, David Douglas, who was born in 1799 and traveled three times to the United States and twice to the Pacific Northwest. Eschewing a formal education, Douglas began his career as a gardener at the age of 11, completing a seven-year apprenticeship, and continuing to learn about plants both on the job and in the library of the estate where he was employed. He obtained an appointment to the Glasgow Botanical Gardens in 1820, where he earned distinction for his work before the Royal Horticultural Society of London sent him to the Pacific Northwest on a plant hunting expedition that started in July 1824 and lasted through October 1827.

He was particularly interested in the flora and fauna documented during the Lewis and Clark expedition, and it was during this trip that he discovered, and upon his return, officially introduced the Douglas-fir to Europe. He returned in October 1829 and visited the Columbia River. He died tragically in Hawaii in 1834 after falling into a pit trap and being mauled by a bull that also fell into the pit.

During his travels and work in the American West, he is credited with finding, collecting, and documenting hundreds of new species, in addition to the Douglas-fir that is named for him, including many notable conifers like the Sitka Spruce, Western White Pine, Ponderosa Pine, Lodgepole Pine, Grand Fir, Noble Fir, as well several shrubs including the flowering currant, salal, and lupin. He joined a distinguished list of other botanists and scientists who were combing the wilderness and discovering and accumulating collections of all the new species this new country was filled with and is considered one of the great explorers of the American west.

While David Douglas gets most of the credit for "discovering" his namesake tree, its scientific name *Pseudotsuga menziesii* comes from Archibald Menzies a Scottish physician and rival of Douglas, who first documented the tree on Vancouver Island in 1791 while serving as naturalist during the HMS Discovery's voyage around the world under Captain George Vancouver.

And of course, long before white people arrived in the Pacific Northwest and began "discovering" things, the local Indigenous Peoples found many uses for this magnificent species.

The Douglas-fir is an evergreen,



The Douglas-fir has gone by many other names in the past, including the Douglas pine, Oregon pine, British Columbian pine, Puget Sound pine, Douglas spruce, and red fir.

There are two varieties of the Douglas-fir based on the geographical location where they reside. The Coast Douglas-fir is native to the Pacific Northwest, is found along the Pacific coast from British Columbia to central California, and is the dominant tree found west of the Cascade Mountain range. It is fast growing, can live from 500 to 1,300 years if allowed to, and can grow to over 300 feet. The needles are usually a dark yellow-green, although they can be bluish green, and their cones are small at just around three inches in length. On mature specimens the bark is extremely thick, up to 14 inches, with distinctive, deep vertical fissures, and the thickness makes it very fire-resistant.

The Rocky Mountain Douglas-fir grows in the inland mountains of the Pacific Northwest and the Rocky Mountains from central British Columbia south to northern and central Mexico. Rocky Mountain Douglas-fir is hardier, slower growing, shorter-lived, and seldom grows over 130 feet tall.

The Douglas-fir cones and seeds are a favorite food of local wildlife, and are used by songbirds, squirrels, and rabbits; Douglas squirrels, native only to the Pacific Northwest, gather the cones, peel away the scales and extract the seed, and then drop the scales, forming midden piles at the base of the tree which are a clear indicator resident Douglas squirrels are in the area.

*continued on page 9*

**KLS SURVEYING**

**Owned and Operated by Don & Kim Wallace**

**DON WALLACE, PLS**  
Professional Land Surveying  
1224 E. Alder St.  
Vernonia, OR 97064  
Phone: 503-429-6115  
FAX: 1-866-297-1402  
Email: DWallace\_KLS@msn.com

CORPORATE MEMBER

**Vernonia Christian**

Everyone is welcome in our vibrant and active community!

Vernonia Christian church is a place to connect with people who love God and love others. *Join us every Sunday for worship service at 9:30am and 11am.*

**PASTOR SAM HOUGH**  
410 NORTH ST. | WWW.VERNONIA.CHURCH | (503) 429-6522

**MIKE PIHL LOGGING CO., INC**  
MikePihlLogging@outlook.com

**503-429-1470**

1984 mist drive  
po box 321  
vernonia, or 97064

cell 503.789.1268  
fax 503.429.0252