

DIG THIS for 11-19-08 by Peg Tillery (Even Evergreens Lose Leaves) © 2008

Many gardeners are retreating inside to pour through seed and gardening catalogues or to explore all those unread gardening books. But, if we do happen to go out into the garden to take advantage of some milder days for clean up and a bit of last minute planting, we may notice some of our evergreen plants looking not so evergreen.

Never fear, gardeners, evergreen plants lose their leaves too. Some even drop all their needles or foliage, causing a panic in newer gardeners or new home owners whose once blue green or dark green conifer suddenly sheds all its foliage. Evergreen shrubs and trees do indeed shed anywhere from a quarter to half of their leaves every year. As new leaves are added to the plant as it grows, the old leaves gradually die and fall off. Woody plants do this just as we humans shed hair. It is part of the growing process of the plant.

Larch (or Tamarack) called *Larix laricina* and Dawn Redwood called *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* both lose their foliage entirely each year. When we look at these majestic trees we think they're evergreens like our cedar, fir and hemlock. Instead these beauties not only give us the splendor of our more familiar conifers but also put on a show each year along with the deciduous trees. If you ever shop at Central Market in Poulsbo, you may have seen the huge larch in the garden at St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Each year the parishioners there have to explain to passersby that their tree is not dying.

*Cryptomeria japonica* (aka plume cedar) is an evergreen tree with soft wispy, ethereal blue green foliage. But each fall the foliage turns shades of red, plum or sienna. Some cryptomeria appear rusty orange in color. Don't panic if you have one of these trees in your inherited garden or see one in your neighborhood for the first time. It too returns to its normal green color every spring and summer.

Rhododendrons and azaleas have foliage that sloughs off by thirds or so each year. Leaves begin to yellow and brown, then drop off. In addition some rhody and azalea varieties lose their leaves entirely in the fall and winter. They have leaves that look evergreen, but are actually deciduous. Other rhodies such as PJM and azaleas such as Stuart Stonianum turn purplish bronze and crimson respectively. Don't worry, in the spring and summer they turn back to green again.

This time of year it may also seem as if cedars and fir are shedding needles and scales everywhere. Never fear, this is normal. Usually these foliage bits and pieces have turned brown and yellow during the summer and early fall, but we didn't notice it until now when the winds and rain scatter it everywhere in our gardens. Some pine varieties seem to lose what seems like huge sections of its foliage but with patient waiting we discover it healthy and covered in greenery once again.

Bottom line: Do not fear, this is all part of the cycle of nature. When in doubt call the WSU Extension MG hotline at 360-337-7158 for advice and encouragement or consult with your favorite Certified Professional Horticulturist (CPH) at your favorite local nursery.