

## **“Eastern Red Cedar” by Sally Cureton**

Winter generally means not much greenery to look at out the window. Fortunately in this part of the country we do have conifers. A very common one of these is the **Eastern Red Cedar**. It is actually the most widespread conifer in the eastern United States and is native to 37 states. A very hardy tree, it will usually be one of the first to be found growing in areas previously cleared for farming or by fire. There are several on the south side of Painter Pond going up the hillside. The next time you are on Palmer Road, you can take a look at them.

Eastern Red Cedar grows well on many kinds of soils, including thin rocky ones like ours. This plant will grow in dry areas, especially on limestone, as well as on wetland soils. It actually prefers soils that have a lower pH level. A true survivor, it is resistant to extremes of drought, heat and cold. Eventually it will grow to a height of 40 to 60 feet and be about 2 feet in diameter. Just like all other conifers, it lacks true flowers - the seeds develop in cones. This tree's small cones, or conelets, are hard to see since they are only about ¼ inch long.

Even though called a cedar, these trees are actually members of the juniper family. They are what is called a dioecious species - male and female flowers are on separate trees. Male trees are easily distinguished in the winter when the conelets turn a yellowish brown at the tips of the branches. Pollination takes place late February to early spring when the conelets will split open.

The wood of the eastern red cedar is very aromatic and therefore has been used for cedar chests, cabinetwork and carvings. It was very prized by early American colonists for building furniture, rail fences and log cabins. At one time, it was the source of almost all pencils made in this country. The oil of this plant is also used - for medicines and perfumes. Wildlife really benefit from this valuable plant. It provides them with both food and shelter. The berries are eaten by birds, such as cedar waxwing, and other animals.