

# Tale from the Garden!

## Living on the Hedge

There are those who think the greatest joys in gardening are to be had from colour. These are probably the folk who never venture into their gardens between November & March, when colour is thin on the ground. They don't know what they are missing, but then they probably have a garden boundary of fencing & that is hardly likely to provoke interest at any time of the year. The thing to do is invest in a hedge rather than a solid boundary. Keep the fence for privacy but cultivate alongside it a 'mixed' hedge & you'll have a jollier winter. A hedge can be kept narrow, & with flowers in Spring/Summer & fruits & coloured stems in Autumn/Winter, it is seldom dull.

The Leyland Cypress, often referred to simply as 'Leylandii', makes a great hedge or screen provided it is regularly clipped - & that is the key, not only choosing a plant that suits the situation, but keeping it under control. Leylandii is often chosen as it's a fast-growing coniferous evergreen tree. But at the centre of many neighbour wars, Leyland cypress can reach great heights very quickly. It's one of the fastest growing conifers and often towers over houses and gardens. Leyland cypress trees can grow to 40m. The foliage is dense and hides much of the trunk. The bark is red-grey with ridges, and twigs are slender, brown and flexible. It features male cones, which are yellow at the tips, & female cones, which are rounded. An annual clipping of the Leylandii can produce a smart outline that poses no threat to your neighbours light.



## Did you know?

It is thought that it was created by accident in a Welsh garden nursery in the 19th century, when two species of cypress – Monterey and Nootka (both from North America) cross-bred. When a wealthy Englishman picked up a cone from the ground on his estate and thought he would sprout a few seeds, he did not know he would end up unleashing perhaps the most polarizing garden plant ever grown. As controversial as it is, the history of this tree is an insight into the past, and just one of the many fascinating stories about where our plants came from. We plant so many different trees, but we rarely think about their origins – maybe we think they just grow on trees! You will not find the majority of the plants we grow in our gardens out in the natural world. They are often the product of complex and skilled breeding programs stretching over decades, but they are just as often the result of pure serendipity, which is how we came to have the Leyland cypress.

In the affluent and relatively calm period that went from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to World War I, gardening was a popular pursuit of the wealthy classes on both sides of the Atlantic, but especially in the UK. It was a time when the owners of grand estates vied with each other to show off the latest arrivals from around the world, and laced their teatime conversations with Latin names and botanical speculations. John Naylor was certainly a member of that privilege class, living at Leighton Hall, just across the English border in Wales. The estate dated back to 1541, and in 1845 Christopher Leyland, a wealthy banker, had bought it. Two years later, he gave it as a wedding present to his favourite nephew, John Naylor.

After rebuilding the house, the next big task was to landscape the grounds. Naylor hired the landscape designer Edward Kemp. Still a young man, Kemp was at the start of an illustrious career that would put him on a par with the more famous Joseph Paxton as a designer in the English Landscape Style. Trees were a critical element in that style, and Kemp made sure to include a wide variety of them, from around the world. The extensive grounds became an arboretum of the rare and exotic.

## **The One in a Million Cone**

Among those trees was Nootka cypress, 'Cupressus nootkatensis', a tree widespread along the Pacific Northwest coast of North America. In 1888, while walking around his estate, John Naylor picked a cone from one of these trees and had his gardeners grow some of the seeds for him. Perhaps he simply wanted to have a few more of these handsome trees on his grounds.

When John died, one of his three sons, Christopher John, inherited Leighton Hall. A few years later, in 1891, Christopher also inherited the estates of an uncle, Thomas Leyland. The major part was Haggerston Castle, on 23,000 acres near the border with Scotland. As was typical of complex inheritances, this caused Leighton Hall to pass to a younger brother of John Naylor, and Christopher took his uncle's name, becoming Christopher Leyland.

An ambitious gardener with a keen interest in trees, Christopher developed Haggerston Castle into a grand rival for his father's property, and during the move took with him six of those cypress seedlings to plant on his new grounds.

In 1911, back at Leighton Hall, another nephew was to repeat the random act of John Naylor by also picking up a cone, but this time from a Monterey cypress growing just 150 feet from that original Nootka cypress. Monterey cypress, 'Cupressus microcarpa', today grows wild only in two small areas on the coast of California, both of them nature reserves.

Christopher Leyland noticed that two of his seedlings were remarkably vigorous and he called one 'Haggerston Grey' and the other 'Green Spire'. The best two trees from that second cone were called 'Leighton Green' and 'Naylor's Blue'.

## **The Botanists Get to Work**

At this point, the botanists join the story. In 1925 a Cambridge professor, William Dawson, was a house guest at Haggerston Castle. Leyland had already noticed the virtues of his seedlings, chiefly in their rapid growth and resistance to salt-spray from the ocean nearby. He asked Dawson to take some samples to William Dallimore, the conifer expert of the time. He pored over the specimens and pronounced them to be hybrids between the Nootka and Monterey Cypresses. Dallimore and his associate Jackson published their findings in the Kew Bulletin of March, 1926, and named the tree *Cupressus x leylandii*, in honour of Christopher Leyland. Cuttings were rooted and planted at several botanic gardens. One of the original trees was now 35 feet tall, and by 1930, it is listed in the catalogue of the famous Hilliers Nursery. Five of the original six trees still survive exactly where they were first planted, but Haggerston Castle does not. Mr. Leyland died the same year he achieved immortality in the name of his tree, and the castle was demolished. Leighton Hall still survives, although today it is unoccupied.

The spread of suburbia, and the new mass-need for instant privacy between homes was a marketing opportunity nurseries across America and Europe were quick to grasp, and millions upon millions of plants were sold during the heyday of Leyland cypress. The *Leylandii* became one of the most popular trees in Britain for hedging.

Trees are some of the most potent symbols in the natural world. When it comes to cypress trees in particular, their height and distinct pyramid-like shape seem to point to the sky, making them lofty symbols of concepts associated with the heavens, such as immortality and hope. Cypress tree symbolism also travels a darker path as the tree is one of the oldest symbols of mourning. In fact, ancient Greeks and Romans referred to the cypress as the "mournful tree" for this reason. Adherents of Christianity and Islam historically planted cypress near burial sites and cemeteries for protection against evil spirits. The cypress tree is also sacred to some practitioners of Christianity who believe the cypress was the source of wood for the crucifixion.

When it comes to sacred symbols, it's difficult to find one as universal as the cypress tree and its associated cypress meaning and symbology. As a potent reminder of life and death, the cypress tree stands between the worlds, literally and figuratively pointing toward immortality and hope as a powerful response to human mourning.

So at this time, when we mourn for those lost, for things sacrificed, for things taken away from us, for things we cherish made so difficult to have & hold, remember that Jesus came to be our link between heaven & earth. He wants us to keep looking upwards, stay hopeful & walk forward into this New Year with fresh resolve that all will be well. We might be living life on the 'hedge', but we can be sure that our faith will protect us.