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**Wildflower Spot – January 2009**  
John Clayton Chapter of the Virginia Native Plant Society

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## EASTERN RED CEDAR

*Juniperus virginiana*

By Helen Hamilton, *President of the John Clayton Chapter, VNPS*

There is much to like about our native red cedar which provides a home for many songbirds. The tree is evergreen, requires full sun, and is tolerant of most soils, especially those dry and infertile. The heartwood is highly aromatic, light, strong, durable, and widely used for cedar chests, cabinets, fuel, and fence posts. The dry outer bark, when stripped and rubbed between the hands, provides excellent tinder. A volatile oil derived from juniper leaves is used in perfumes and a flavoring may be derived from the berries.

Eastern red cedar can grow to 60 feet tall, retaining an attractive columnar-pyramidal form. The leaves are of two types -- sharp, spreading and needle-like on young plants up to 3 years old and as scattered shoots on adult trees. The adult leaves are small, scalelike, overlapping and carry a heavy coating, permitting survival during cold winters and hot dry summers.

Important winter food for birds and small mammals are the bluish waxy seed cones, berry-like with fleshy scales. Inside the cones are a few wingless seeds, which pass through digestive tracts undamaged

and are often dropped along fences. The fruits are eaten by over 50 species of birds, including cedar waxwings, bluebirds, bobwhite, grouse and pheasant. The great purple and olive hairstreak butterflies lay their eggs on red cedar which furnishes food for the larva.

European settlers planted cedars on either side of their front doors as a good luck charm – possibly because they are so long-lived. American Indians chewed the fruit for canker sores, and used fruit tea for colds and coughs. Leaf smoke or steam was inhaled for colds, bronchitis and rheumatism, and for purification rituals.

Ranging from southwest Maine to southern Minnesota, and southwest to Georgia and Texas, red cedar grows naturally in almost every county in Virginia. Juniper seedlings appear frequently in meadows and gardens, again from bird distribution. Cedar trees without the “berries” in the fall and winter are probably the male of the species, which carry golden-brown remnants of their pollenbearing cones. ❖



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**Photos:** Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*) by Jan Newton and Helen Hamilton  
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