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Description

Revealing the fascinating stories behind the park's magnificent trees

By **Michael Walsh**

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Many people enjoy walking through Westmount Park to admire the variety of beautiful mature trees but don't know their names and origins. Let's take a walk through the park to identify them and discover the stories behind these magnificent trees. Indeed, appreciating the true beauty of these trees in Westmount Park shows that some things we consider commonplace are truly exotic!

Westmount Park's Brewer Spruce

There is quite a remarkable solitary spruce growing in Westmount Park near the lagoon's western portion. One can easily identify it as a spruce by its short sharp needles that are not flat in appearance. Specifically, this is a **Brewer spruce** (*Picea breweriana*), also known as **Weeping spruce**, a name that describes its distinctive beautiful drooping branches. It was first discovered by [William Henry Brewer](#) of Yale University in the late 1800s.



Brewer spruce

It has been described as “one of the most attractive conifers in the world”. In fact, it is also one of the rarest spruces – its rarity comprises an interesting story.

The species (now termed a “relict”) flourished in the **Arcto-Tertiary forests** that extended from the southwest coast of North America to the arctic regions. This massive forest began to retreat when tectonic plate movements and volcanic activity occurred during the **Pliocene era** (10 million years ago) forming the Sierra Nevada and Cascade mountain range. A further retreat of the forest occurred during the **Pleistocene era** (1 million years ago) when the glacial ice sheets covered most of North America.

One area, however, was unaffected by these massive geological and climatic changes: the **Siskiyou mountains** within the current Klamath-Siskiyou region that today straddles the border between California and Oregon. It is within this protected region the Brewer’s Spruce and thirty other conifer species found nowhere else in this world still persist to this very day.

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The next time when you walk by this particular tree, think of the time span it represents and how it is currently measured in human terms. The best description I have found is by Rachel Sussman while describing her book *The Oldest Living Things in the World*:

“One of my primary goals with this work was to create a little jolt of recognition at the shallowness of human timekeeping and the blink that is a human lifespan. Does our understanding of time have to be tethered to our

physiological experience of it? I don't think so. Deep time is like deep water: We are constantly brought back to the surface, pulled by the wants and needs of the moment."

Westmount Park's Jack Pine

One of our favourite movies during the holiday season is ***A Charlie Brown Christmas***. Although produced in 1965, it has stood the test of time and become a season classic. In one scene, Charlie Brown hangs a single glass ornament on the spindly Christmas tree he brought home causing it to bend. He remarks: "I've killed it. Oh! Everything I touch gets ruined."



Jack pine

I have often wondered if Westmount Park contains a pine tree, similar to the one depicted in the movie. As luck may have it, during our many walks through the park, I have noticed a pine tree that very closely resembles the one depicted in the movie. With its tall and spindly shape, it can be easily overlooked in its location near the lagoon south of the clay tennis courts.

This particular tree is a **Jack Pine** (*Pinus banksiana*), also known as **scrub pine, gray pine, Banksian pine, black pine**, and within Canada, **princess pine** or **Hudson Bay pine**. Interestingly, its scientific name honours Sir **Joseph Banks** – the British naturalist who also arranged Captain William Bligh's expedition to Tahiti on the HMS Bounty – a voyage that ended with a mutiny.

Jack pines are native to the northeastern states and across Canada, their northern latitude extending further than any other American pine.

They are easily identified by their long needles in bundles of two and their unique shape caused by a twist from

base to tip. In addition, they are the sole pine species containing cones that twist at their tips. These cones can remain closed for many years. Normally, forest fires result in the opening of the cones causing the distribution of seeds on the ash bed.

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Next time you pass by this lonely-looking pine, remember Linus Van Pelt’s description: “I never thought it was such a bad little tree. It’s not bad at all, really. Maybe it just needs a little love.”

Westmount Park’s Norway Spruces

One has to admit, there is a spectacular display of autumn colours in Westmount Park. When the leaves have fallen, we enter a period where most of us begin to experience a sense of outdoor colour deprivation. As such, we develop a greater awareness of the various green conifers that grace the park.



Norway spruce

For instance, have you ever wondered if the conifer you are looking at is a **pine, spruce or fir?** There is a simple way to differentiate between these three families. (Of course, there are always exceptions). Pines have long slender needles in bundles of two to five. In spruces, the needles are short, sharp and four-sided. Firs have short, blunt and flat needles attached by short stalks to the twigs.

There is a beautiful stand of **Norway Spruces** (*Picea abies*) adjacent to the park’s gazebo. The species is used



extensively in Europe as Christmas decorations. Looking closely, one can tell it's a spruce with its single, sharp, four-sided needles. The type of spruce is simple to identify: Norway Spruces are unique in that the tree's cones are downward facing and their branches droop towards the ground allowing the tree to shed its winter snow. Although commonly named "evergreens", the needles are eventually shed – although this might occur once every 10 years.

In the 1800s, resin was collected from these trees to manufacture **spruce gum**. It was widely sold as a long-lasting, "woody flavoured", purplish chewing gum. Children living in the country would obtain their gum directly from hardened resin on the tree's trunk. Once collected, the resin is boiled and allowed to cool before being broken into bite-sized pieces and dusted with cornstarch.

In addition, the tree's branches and needles, when boiled with water and molasses, comprise the basis of an excellent **spruce beer**.

'... the world's oldest known tree is a Norway Spruce located in central Sweden's mountainous Dalarna Province – it contains a root system that has been growing for 9,550 years!'

Interestingly, Norway Spruces possess the ability to regenerate their trunks. Specifically, the tree's trunk can have a lifespan of up to 600 years, however, when it finally dies a new one is propagated from the roots. In fact, the world's oldest known tree is a Norway Spruce located in central Sweden's mountainous Dalarna Province – it contains a root system that has been growing for 9,550 years!

Westmount Park's Catalpa Trees

As a young child, one of my first books was the *Dick and Jane* series. One particular story described a cottage that was covered with red and orange nasturtiums so vividly coloured that villagers summoned their fire department thinking there was a fire!



Catalpa tree

Westmount Park would be the perfect location for a continuation of that series – I have noticed many people stopped in fascination by what looked like a blanket of snow, in the middle of June, covering the park's lawns and portions of the lagoon. In fact, these were the white blossoms from the park's **Northern Catalpa** (*Catalpa speciosa*), trees distinguished by their large heart-shaped leaves. (The Southern Catalpa, *Catalpa bignonioides*, have leaves that, when bruised, emit a disagreeable odour.)

Closely examining a single blossom leaves one amazed at its beauty. Each flower resembles a white orchid with ruffled edges. Their interiors are lined with purple and maroon dots as well as lines interspersed with yellow streaking.

The word "Catalpa" (a misspelling of *Catawba*) originates from the **Catawba Indians'** ancestral lands along the Catawba River in North Carolina. The trees are native to western Georgia, western Florida, Alabama and eastern Mississippi. The tree was first described by [Mark Catesby](#) in 1726 during an expedition from England to document the New World's flora and fauna.

The trees bloom mid to late June with large clusters of flowers. Each cluster contains a total of twenty-seven flowers from a common stem (inflorescence). Each inflorescence blossoms from 5 to 6 days. The entire tree blossoms for 8 to 12 days.

'Fishermen have valued the tree as a source of worms for the past 140 years. Specifically, the larva of the Catalpa Sphinx (sphinx moth) only feeds on Catalpa leaves and are prized as fish bait.'

Interestingly, the flower's stigmas (pollen-receptive surfaces) are sensitive to motion. If disturbed and no pollen is deposited, the flower's lobes will close within one minute and reopen five minutes later. If, however, pollen is

deposited the lobes close permanently. The flowers develop into fruit resembling long bean pods filled with seeds that remain on the tree throughout the winter.

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Westmount Park's Crab Apple Blossoms

Did you enjoy Westmount Park's unofficial "apple blossom festival"? Throughout the world, the arrival of spring is heralded by brilliant colour displays from blossoming trees.



Crab apple tree

In Japan's Honshui Island's Hirosaki Park, sakura (cherry blossoms) numbering in the millions bloom in early spring. In Washington, warmer temperatures are marked by the blossoming of thousands of Yoshino (cherry) trees given as a gift of friendship, in 1912, from Japan.

Westmount cannot compete with either location but in our own small way we did have a spectacular, head-turning, display of thousands of flowers, albeit for only two short weeks, from the park's **sweet crab apple** (*Malus coronaria*) trees. During that time the park was ablaze with white and pinkish-coloured blossoms that filled the air with a beautiful sweet fragrance.

Crab trees are native to Britain (originally introduced by the Romans) and are the ancestors of today's cultivated (cultivar) apples. The tree's name "crab" originates from the Norse word for scrubby, "skrab".

The path from ancient crab trees to today's domesticated apple cultivars is a fascinating story. (No it wasn't



solely *Johnny Appleseed* as we were taught in school). The story starts with the **Old Silk Roads** – ancient trade routes from the Caspian Region (Black Sea) to Western China – established in the **Neolithic period** (10,000 B.C.).

Trains of pack animals would spread seeds from ingested fruit along the route causing new hybrids to develop from previously isolated species. The invention of grafting techniques (by either the Persians or Chinese) and used by the Greeks, created new apple cultivars as described in the botanical works of **Theophrastus** (around 300 B.C.).

The Romans brought apple cultivars to Britain where they flourished and hybridized, amongst themselves, to such an extent that, by the nineteenth century, every town and village in central and southern England could lay claim to a local apple.

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Apples were introduced to North America by the colonists in the sixteenth century in the form of seeds (grafting was rarely practiced). In fact, entire apple orchards were started with seeds (pips) that allowed hybridization with local crab trees to produce new species of cultivars in a fashion described as a “vast experimental station”.

Next time you are walking through Westmount Park, where the paths are lined with crab apple trees, think back over seven centuries to **Bartholomeus Anglicus** who, in 1240, in one of the earliest botanical books describes, “Malus the Appyll tree as containing dyurs blossomes, and floures of swetnesse and lykynge: with goode fruyte and noble... some beryth sourysh fruyte and harde, and some ryght soure and some ryght swete, with a good savoure and mery”.

Westmount Park’s Red Pine and Coppiced Trees

I have always been intrigued with the conifer, next to Westmount Park’s gazebo, which has four trunks. The tree’s long slender needles (attached in bundles) make it a pine. One can tell it is a **Red Pine** (*Pinus resinosa*) by its reddish-brown bark in armour-like plates, the needles being attached in bundles of two; and interestingly, their ability to break if one wraps them around a finger! The species is commonly known as **Norway Pine** – although native to North America – it never grew in Norway.



Red pine

The four trunks are an interesting story. This is commonly known as **coppicing** (from French *couper*). It is the ability of a tree, if damaged, to regenerate from a stump ("main stool"). One can only speculate that either severe weather or insect damage caused the park's Red Pine to lose its main trunk (the thick bark is resistant to surface fires of moderate intensity).

Coppicing produces a self-renewing source of wood (that can last for hundreds of years) and, in the past, was a sustainable form of lumber production. In fact, in Britain, the oldest trees are coppice stools that date well over 1,000 years. This form of lumber production dates to the **Neolithic era (stone age)** evidenced by ancient wooden tracks, from coppiced trees, across the peat moors in **Somerset Levels, England**.

Along the **Anatolian coast** (present-day Turkey), a **honey** is produced from Red Pines. One specific insect (*Marcheliana hellenica*) burrows under the bark, concealed in whitish secretions, and produces a sugary pinkish-coloured honeydew that is collected by bees.

Native Americans (particularly the **Ojibwe** people) used the trees' needles to make dancing figures. The needles were cut to form a dress and arms, then placed on a sheet of birch bark that, when tilted, gave the appearance of the figures dancing.

'The species is commonly known as Norway Pine – although native to North America – it never grew in Norway.'

Finally, the reverence Native Americans had to pine trees is reflected in the poignant **Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) legend** that tells of seven dancing brothers that one day rose from earth to become stars. One of the



brothers looked back and saw their mother crying – in doing so, he fell back to earth. At the point where he entered the ground, a towering pine tree grew that pointed to the location of the other brothers in the sky.

Feature image: stand of White firs and Crab apples by the Westmount Library, by Patricia Dumais

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Michael Walsh is a long-time Westmount resident. He is happily retired from nearly four decades in the field of higher education technology. A “professional student” by nature, his academic training and publishing include statistical methodology, mycology and animal psychology. Today, he enjoys spending time walking with his dog while discovering the city’s past and sharing stories of the majestic trees that grace the parks and streets. He can be contacted at michaeld2003@hotmail.com or through his blog [Westmount Overlooked](#)

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