For local botanists and plant lovers, this time of year can be a little slow. The monotonous rain and lack of flashy flowers and foliage keeps many intrepid plant admirers indoors. However, this is my favorite time of year to appreciate the lesser-beloved species that fundamentally shape our surroundings and provide the often-ignored backdrop to our local explorations.

Gray pine, *Pinus sabiniana*, is chief among these lesser-beloved species. I find myself always stopping to appreciate it at this time of year. However, it might be a little bit of an understatement to say that gray pine is simply “lesser-beloved.” It seems that most people I talk to go so far as to say they hate gray pine trees. Gray pine detractors often cite characteristics like its bizarre growth form, its tendency to fall over, and its lack of commercial value to explain their distaste for the species. *Willis Linn Jepson*, one of California’s most notable early botanists, even described this attitude in 1910 in *The Silva of California*:

> Scarcely in any sense a beautiful tree, offering no comfort of shade to the inexperienced wayfarer who, dusty and sun-bitten, seeks its protection, scorned, too, by the lumbermen, it is nevertheless the most interesting and picturesque tree of the foothills on account of its scattered growth, its thin gray cloud of foliage, its variety of branching and its burden of massive cones.

Gray pines are common in the blue oak woodlands that surround the California central valley. Gray pines’ irregular crowns and split, twisting trunks sometimes seem to grow in ways that defy gravity. Photo by *David Ledger*. 

THE CASE FOR GRAY PINE
by Laura Brodhead
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Like Jepson, though, I want to make the case for appreciating the gray pine. The gray pine is one of the area’s most prominent, distinctive, and even characteristic species. While I admit that the gray pine has some negatives, I think its positives easily outweigh these negatives.

A good place to begin one’s appreciation for this species is to first learn what to call it. Common names of plants can sometimes be numerous, but in the case of gray pine, I feel like I learn a new name for it every few months! Historically, this tree has been called digger pine. This name is no longer used due to the pejorative nature of the word “digger” in relation to local Native American peoples, to whom this species was extremely valuable. Other names you might hear are ghost pine, Sabine pine, bull pine, California foothill pine, or even nut pine.

As Jepson describes, the gray pine’s sparse growth can sometimes confuse not-yet-gray-pine lovers. While most pine trees have thick canopies that are great for providing abundant shade, the gray pine’s foliage remains wispy and scattered and offers no respite from the sun. The dull gray-green needles are 7 to 17 inches long and come packaged together in bundles of three. The tree is generally 40 to 80 feet tall, but at about 15 to 25 feet off the ground, the tree trunk often forks into two or more twisted stems that sometimes grow at irregular angles to each other. Because of this branching axis, the crown of the tree is often open and ragged looking. The bark of the gray pine is dark brown to nearly black, with deep irregular furrows that sometimes reveal an orangey underbark.

Though many gray pine detractors list its peculiar form and coloring as a negative, I find its uniqueness refreshing. Sunlight and views of the sky filter through the lacy canopy in a pattern that no other pine tree can rival. When silhouetted against the horizon, the strange shape of the gray pine provides a bit of whimsy to the landscape. Sometimes the odd branch angles and the ability of the tree to grow seemingly horizontally out of rock faces makes it look almost gravity defying. The growth form and angles of the gray pine are so distinctive that I have found it to be one of the most reliably teachable trees in the area—once I point out a gray pine to someone, even through a car window driving at 60 miles per hour, they can almost always identify the species again.

Gray pines grow in the dry, exposed, rocky soils of the California chaparral and foothills, creating whimsical shapes along the horizons of these landscapes. Photo by Laura Brodhead.

Gray pine cones are a marvel unto themselves. At 6 to 10 inches long, gray pine cones are considerably sized, but their true magnificence comes from their heft. A gray pine cone can weigh between 0.75 and 2.2 pounds. The cone itself is resin filled, brown, and egg shaped with savage points on the ends of the cone scales. The cones persist on the ground after falling, so they are easy to examine and admire for their size, weight, and defenses. No other pine cone seems to announce itself quite as loudly on the landscape as a falling gray pine cone.

Besides being impressive to look at, the gray pine cone is extremely useful. The fierce cone scales hide
many big, edible seeds, or pine nuts, tucked away in the cone. If you can work the seeds out of the cone and crack their tough shells, you will be rewarded with an extremely delicious, and nutritious, snack. The seeds are high in protein and fat and provide approximately 571 kilocalories per 100 grams, traditionally making gray pine seeds highly valued as a food resource to local Native American people. Other parts of the cones, bark, and buds were eaten, and the abundant resin found in the cone and tree was used for medicinal purposes. Although today the gray pine is seen to have little commercial value, traditionally the species was almost invaluable, providing important life-sustaining resources to the local people.

My final reason for deeply appreciating the gray pine is simply because it makes its home here just as I do. Gray pines grow in the foothill woodlands and chaparral of California, with just a few making their way across the border into Oregon, at elevations from just above sea level to 2,000 feet. They are particularly abundant in the blue oak woodlands that ring the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys. To me, more than a sequoia or a redwood, the gray pine symbolizes California. They grow in extremely rocky, dry locations, seeking out the harshness of bright, exposed sunlight. Gray pines have the remarkable ability to grow on the poorest of soils, like serpentine outcrops, by using specific adaptations to regulate the amount of soil nutrients it uptakes.

At this time of year, I urge you to look past your preconceptions of gray pine and to simply take the time to notice them as they grow all around us. This species provides the unique horizon line that I have come to associate with the foothills of California, especially in the Northstate. Give the gray pine a chance to impress you with its distinctive beauty and ability to grow where few other trees even try.