Each fall I find myself in Costco at some point, looking at the fresh holiday greenery for sale, and asking myself, “I wonder how many of these shoppers know that these boughs come from native trees that grow less than an hour from here?”

I know, I know—these kinds of nerdy thoughts are an occupational hazard for a botanist. I also find myself at the craft store standing in front of a bin of pine cones asking myself, “Really? People pay for pine cones?” But I digress.

My real subject here is incense-cedar. Note the hyphen: incense-cedar is not a true cedar. True cedars—cedar of Lebanon, Atlas cedar, deodar cedar, and their relatives—are in the genus *Cedrus*, in the pine family. True cedars have needles and upright cones. There are no true cedars in North America. We do have an astonishing array of faux cedars, including a bunch native to California. These include Port-Orford-cedar, western redcedar, Alaska white-cedar, and incense-cedar. These cedars are all in the
Cypress family, not the pine family, and have little scale-like leaves (think juniper or arbor vitae foliage if you aren’t sure what I mean by scale-like.) Their cones are small and shaped not at all like pine cones. What they do have in common is fragrant foliage and wood, and this is probably why European settlers named them cedars.

Incense-cedar, *Calocedrus decurrens*, is a western North American native evergreen tree that ranges from the southern slope of Mount Hood in Oregon; southward to California through the Siskiyou, Klamath, and Warner mountains; through the Cascade and Coast ranges and Sierra Nevada; to mountains in Baja California; as well as in the Washoe Mountains of west-central Nevada. Incense-cedar grows from the coastal fog belt eastward to the desert fringes on a variety of soil types. Within its range, it is a common component of mixed conifer and conifer-hardwood forests. This native tree is clearly adaptable to many California growing conditions. Weaverville, Mt. Shasta, Lakehead, and Shingletown are within the native range of incense-cedar; gardeners in those places need not irrigate their incense-cedars once they are well established. Redding is outside the incense-cedar native zone, and trees planted here will need supplemental irrigation during the hot, dry summer months.

I planted incense-cedars in my north Redding garden a decade ago, on well drained, poor rocky clay soil. They have grown slowly into conical green vertical accents in my mixed border. I water them with a sprinkler about once a month during summer and early fall. I cut the lower boughs for holiday décor and for cushioning gift parcels instead of foam peanuts. I love the fragrance and texture of the foliage, and the flexible boughs. One year we even had an incense-cedar for a Christmas tree.

In my hikes in the mountains of the north state, I admire the stately angular silhouettes of older incense-cedars, with their furrowed, fibrous, cinnamon-colored bark and lacy ascending branches. Someday my trees will attain the character that comes with age. For now, they are reliable garden plants with a holiday greenery bonus.