

# What is the Hobby of Collecting Conifers: An Obsession or an Investment?

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If anyone had asked Dianne, my first wife, this question in the 1970s, she would have said, "Definitely an addiction."

We had built a new house in 1974, and when I worked on landscaping the property, I discovered the world of conifers. I no longer thought of all conifers as "pine trees."

We were young high school teachers with a mortgage. Money was tight, and I had limited funds for plants. I even resorted to digging seedlings out of the forests to fulfill some of my plant needs.

As my tastes became more selective, I found sources for unusual conifers, which, of course, came with a price tag to match. I became part of the Northeastern United States Conifer Collectors' Network (not that there was such a thing).

During school holidays and over the summer, I would visit with friends I had made and who also had my "addiction." I often drove on day trips to the tip of Long Island, New York, while visiting with friends there and in New Jersey. By the time I got home late at night, my wallet and pockets were empty. My last fifty cents were always spent on the Delaware River's toll between New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

I was lucky that I never lost that fifty cents or I would have been stuck in New Jersey. In retrospect, I probably should have carried a rag and a bottle of Windex. I could have panhandled enough money to cover the toll if I was broke.

My friends were very sharing and encouraged my love of this conifer plant group. Most of them had small backyard nurseries and were in the retail conifer business. I had to be careful with my money. My main stop in New Jersey was always at Watnong Nursery (Morris Plains) with Don and Hazel Smith. They had a treasure trove of dwarf conifers and consistently drained my wallet. Usually, I saw them on a Saturday and returned home. I skipped them when going to Long Island for time and financial reasons.



Don and Hazel Smith in front of the raised rock garden at Watnong Nursery.

Visiting with Don and Hazel was always an enjoyable experience. Don would chuckle at my enthusiasm and give me all sorts of encouragement. Eventually, Don sold me half of his inventory for a fraction of its value. He knew I was starting a conifer nursery and wanted to help me get it going. I think he was also beginning to feel his age and wanted to cut back on his workload. It was almost as if Watnong Nursery was merging into Coenosium Gardens.

I doubt that the Smiths ever made a penny from their nursery. It was more a labor of love. They lectured incessantly up and down the East Coast about the value of dwarf conifers in the garden. Don had even propagated 100 cultivars of *Tsuga canadensis* (Canadian hemlock) in a Nearing frame to donate to three different arboreta. He tried to root three of each cultivar to give away so that they would all be the same age and be observed for their characteristics over a long period.

Watnong Nursery was not run as an investment. Mainly, I believe, it was a love for the myriad of people who shared their interests and were regular visitors.



Joe and Elizabeth (Bess) Reis showing a few of their conifers in front of their home.

On Long Island, I developed several close friendships. Eddie Rezek and Joe Reis were a team with whom I spent a lot of time. They had worked together in a sheet metal plant where they used to treat sheet metal in large pickling vats. Eddie tired of having his clothing destroyed with acid and became a mailman. Joe stuck with it until he retired. I believe that Joe got Eddie interested in dwarf conifers, and they were almost inseparable.

Joe considered his garden an investment and had set things up with Eddie so that, when he died, Eddie would sell off plants to provide Bess, his widow, with income when she needed it. Joe loved his plants and did considerable research with seedlings, especially dwarf forms of *Chamaecyparis obtusa* (Hinoki false-cypress).

I talked Joe out of several of his older plants. He sold them to me at a price considerably below their actual value. He loved his conifers and wanted them to go to a good home. I still have the first plant propagated from his original *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'JR'. It was already 20 years old when I bought it in 1976 for forty-five dollars.

Joe was a conifer collector. His nursery was something to help him finance his "hobby." The idea of having a collection as an investment was anything but his primary goal.

Meanwhile, Eddie had retired from the U.S. Postal Service and focused more on his small nursery. He was more interested than Joe in making some income from his conifers. Still, he collected them mainly because he was genuinely fascinated with them.

Eddie worked on small-scale landscaping jobs throughout the city where he lived. I always told him he had a great racket. Eddie used these gardens as his growing operation. He would install a garden and sell a maintenance contract with it. Whenever a plant got too big for its spot, Eddie would replace it with a smaller plant. He was paid for the smaller plant and its installation. The plant he removed was used as a replacement in one of his larger landscape jobs. He was playing a form of checkers with these plants. I believe he sold quite a few plants multiple times with this program. Eddie was also a master designer for miniature gardens. He would make a concrete basin and landscape it in miniature, sometimes even with a



Eddie Rezek standing beside one of his garden spots in his backyard.



One of Eddie's free-form planters.

grotto and running water. Then he would sell it to a local garden center that had a standing order with him. It was quite lucrative for him.

Landscaping allowed Eddie to indulge himself in his "hobby." He combined the approaches of using conifers as an investment while also treating his obsession with this plant group.

Joe and Eddie were two essential role models for my approach to conifer collecting. I decided to start a nursery to convince Dianne that my conifer purchases were an investment, not an obsession. I would create a landscaped garden that would provide me with stock plants to build my inventory. Besides, I had to figure a way to afford the plants I wanted to get from my friends. My tastes were becoming more expensive as I started going after rarer plants.

Joel Spingarn and Layne Ziegenfuss were friends who had nurseries known for their rare and unusual conifers. Joel was one of my Long Island friends. I often visited with him and enjoyed his garden.

However, I mainly spent time with Joel, combing through his salable inventory. He was focused on making an income from his plants, and they were expensive.

It was interesting watching the interactions between Joel, who was income-focused, and Eddie and Joe, who were plant-focused. Joel gave me lessons on setting the correct values for these rare conifers. Joel was a collector who loved his conifers but treated them as an investment rather than an obsession.

Layne's nursery was a wholesale nursery focused on selling newly propagated conifers. He was well-known in the trade and depended upon his expertise in grafting and rooting plants for his income. He was also a collector who mixed business with pleasure. He would not sell plants from his collection unless he had some surplus. His prices were based upon a certain naivete about their actual values.

Eddie and Joe would bring a doctor friend from Long Island to meet with Layne. He would purchase some plants out of Layne's gardens at what Layne thought



Joel Spingarn at his Long Island home next to a very old dwarf *Chamaecyparis obtusa*.

were ridiculously high prices. Eddie would set the costs, and Layne would marvel at the amounts that the doctor paid.

Layne and Joel gave me good insight into combining my obsession with an income. The nursery I started was called Coenosium Gardens. It allowed me to have a supplemental income that I could use to finance my hobby. It was a successful business, but it never provided more than an extra income that paid its expenses while I indulged myself.

I was able to use the extra income in a variety of ways. Layne helped me sell my in-ground conifer collection to a Long Island nursery when Dianne and I moved from Pennsylvania to Oregon. The sale financed our move. Among other things, I played a highly active role in the first five years of the American Conifer Society. Later, I used the income to offset the cost of self-publishing a series of conifer books.

I have been obsessed with conifers for the past 46 years. My obsession has been an integral part of an investment. I believe that all real conifer collectors fall into this realm, even though very few will attempt to start any nursery.

The return of the investment is its effect on the quality of life. Conifers not only add to the beauty of a garden, providing an intrinsic value to a home and its garden, but they also offer a reason to become part of an extraordinary world. That world is one populated with people who share a love for these same plants.

My life has been enriched beyond measure through the many close friendships I developed over the years. They were a result of my membership in the conifer world. I even wrote a book about many of these friendships. If conifer collecting is more of an obsession than an investment, that is all right. It is an obsession that needs no treatment.