

# Why I Hugged a Cedar Tree

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Physical distancing is the new normal, thanks to the novel coronavirus. Luckily, trees are not susceptible to this virus, so physical distancing between you and your arboreal acquaintance is not necessary! In light of this and the fact that April is Earth Month, we at TreeFolks are fully supporting tree-hugging in this time of crisis.

I chose to hug a cedar tree, or a juniper if you want to get technical, because I feel like they get a bad rap. This tree is located in my backyard (so I didn't break the stay at home order for this picture!) in Northwest Austin up near Cedar Park, but you can probably find a cedar tree closer to where you live. Not to brag, but your cedar probably won't be as big as mine (but if it is, we want to see it!). This tree defies my abilities to guesstimate age, though it is about 24-26" in diameter and nearly 40' tall. Junipers, especially those found in this part of Texas, rarely attain this size, but when they do, they can be exceptional, evergreen shade trees that attract cedar waxwings by the droves every winter.

If you're east of I-35, it's possible your cedar would not be the same as my cedar. Austin has two species of juniper, the Ashe juniper and the Virginian juniper (or Eastern Redcedar, but that name starts to get confusing after a while). The ranges of both native juniper species overlap across I-35 with Ashe to the West and Virginian to the East and a smattering of hybrids in the middle. My tree is an Ashe juniper; they are notoriously shorter and often multi-trunked. It's easy to tell them apart if you know what to look for: red-orange mature bark, prickly foliage, and acute branch angles make an Ashe; silver mature bark, smooth foliage, and perpendicular branch angles make a Virginian. If it's falling between those distinctions, you might have a hybrid!

Junipers in Texas have been maligned as invasive, water stealing, or noxious for nearly as long as European settlers have been present in the area. While some of these assertions might be rooted in truth, most are overblown. Junipers are a natural part of the Texas landscape that have been here long before the first human ever arrived, which was thousands of years before a certain Italian with bad geography skills erroneously claimed to have found India by sailing west from Spain.

Now, cedar brakes are larger than they ever have been, more due to the selective grazing pressures of cattle than anything else. Fires generally restricted juniper forests to the northern slopes of hillsides, but with imported cattle now everywhere, juniper is too. While these expansive juniper stretches do catch a lot of rain and prevent disastrous floods from coursing down our waterways, they are not “water stealers” and it seems juniper may actually transpire less water than oaks, especially when growing *en masse*. They might be allergenic, but what tree isn’t? I sneeze and cough twice for every oak catkin that blooms, but I’ve never cut down an oak for its pollen. And while cows might find it distasteful and prickly, it certainly isn’t poisonous unless you distill out and then consume the toxic chemical cedrol from the leaves and twigs. Humans have used the berries as a food source and flavoring agent for millennia, and our native wildlife rely on juniper browse almost exclusively during our tougher summers. All in all, the benefits of cedar trees, which you now know are actually junipers, outweigh the negatives, at least in my mind. I’m sure a rancher or two has yet to be convinced, but I’ll keep trying!