

Juniper

By Frank A. Lang

Western juniper (*Juniperus occidentalis*) is emblematic of central and eastern Oregon, where it thrives in the arid climate and extreme temperatures of the high desert. In addition to western juniper, two other junipers occur in Oregon: common juniper (*Juniperus communis*) and Rocky Mountain juniper (*Juniperus scopulorum*).

Characterized by grey-green branchlets, western juniper has a powdery blue, berry-like cone with a thin waxy coat that is easily rubbed off. Junipers may be low and spreading with small needle-like leaves (common juniper) or a tree with scale-like leaves (Rocky Mountain and western juniper).

Western juniper is widely distributed across the cold, arid, central and eastern Oregon landscape between sagebrush flats and pine forests. It does not tolerate shade, and fire easily kills it. Fire suppression and livestock grazing, which has reduced the grasses that fuel fires, have allowed it to expand into sagebrush flats. Birds and rodents spread junipers by eating the so-called berries, thus scarifying the seeds as they pass through an animal's digestive tract.

The leaves and berries of western juniper have been used medicinally by Native Americans in infusions, decoctions, and poultices for a number of different ailments. Ranchers have found that the trunks of junipers make nearly indestructible fence posts, and the wood has been used to create novelty items such as lamps and furniture. The Round Barn built by early settler and rancher Peter French in Harney County used large juniper trees in its construction, and it has stood on the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge since the 1870s.

Sources

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