

History of Spruce Reforestation in the Southern Appalachians

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Between 1923 and 1931, as the lumbermen retreated, researchers from the newly established Southeastern Forest Experiment Station in Asheville laid out seventy-seven small plots (each spanning about a tenth of an acre) at an elevation of 5,500 feet on the southeastern face of Clingman's Peak. Along with native red spruce and fraser fir, foresters planted a variety of alien trees, hoping to find some fast growing species that might be used to repopulate the fire-ravaged mountains. During the first years of the experiment they planted red pine and white spruce from the Great Lake States, white cedar from New England and douglas fir, sitka spruce and lodgepole pine from the American west. From Scandinavia they brought silver fir, scotch pine and Norway spruce. From the far east came Japanese Larch, black pine, and red pine. On the same slopes where Andre Michaux had once collected Black Mountain trees for European cultivation, foresters now reversed the process and planted exotic gardens of Old World specimens. It was Progressive Gospel of Efficiency carried to the extreme. Not simply an attempt to recover what had been lost, it was an effort to improve the status quo, to make nature better, more efficient, and more profitable in *les hautes montaignes de Caroline*.

Several nonnative species – red pine, white cedar, and Japanese larch – showed promise. But Norway spruce was by far the most successful import. Having evolved in the near-Arctic climes of northern Europe, the trees adapted well to the milder Black Mountain winters, especially when planted on the wind-sheltered slopes of Clingman's Peak and Potato Knob. A decade later nearly 70% of the seedlings had survived and were growing at an average rate of nearly half-foot per year. For some reason, however, the trees apparently did not sustain themselves through natural reseeding. Eventually foresters concluded that when it came to reforestation, neither Norway spruce nor any of the other exotics “demonstrated any superiority over the native red spruce and southern balsam [Fraser] fir.”