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FRAGRANT FIR OR RATHER DOUGLAS FIR

by Giovanni Bernetti June 16 2016

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The Douglas fir is an American conifer that rapidly produces very good timber, the reason why it was introduced into Europe, including Italy. It looks like a fir but if you rub the leaves instead of smelling of resin, it smells like lemon hence the name “fragrant American fir”. Science has given it many other names. Originally it was classified as a Pinus. When Elie Abel Carrière began to reform the conifer systematics, he noticed it resembled a Tsuga, but not

exactly, so it adopted the name Pseudotsuga. The specific attribute douglasii is in honor of David Douglas who, in the early 19th century, distributed it to the botanical gardens in Europe. However, earlier, in the late 18th century, the species had been described by explorer Archibald Menzies, and it was for this reason that Charles François Brisseau de Mirbel had given him the name of Pinus menziesii. It was the reason for which a Portuguese professor of noble lineage (Joao Manual Antonia, Pais do Amaral Franco) determined that the current valid name is *Pseudotsuga menziesii* (Mirbel) Franco. However, for a long time, her American compatriots retained the name *Pseudotsuga taxifolia*, proposed by Nathaniel Britton, a professor at Columbia University.
My goodness, what does it take to give a name to a plant!
Nevertheless, the memory of Douglas (the Botanical Garden of Edinburgh's heroic collector seminum) has remained in the names in all current languages: Douglasia, Douglasie, Douglas, Duglasie, etc. Italian carpenters call its highly prized wood "the douglas". It would be better if the Italian name specified "green Douglas fir" to distinguish it from the much less productive variety that grows in the Rocky Mountains.
In the wild, the green Douglas fir lives in an impressive formation that characterizes the mountains along the Pacific coast where, together with the Sequoias, Pinus lambertiana, Abies grandis and others, make up the entire belt of the giant conifer forests, which are found in the mountains that go from Canada to California. Here, this formation is known as "Oregon's Forests".
Europe's interest in the plants for timber production came about in the late 19th century. In particular, it is possible that Italy was the very country where the possibility of the introduction was studied with a particularly broad and systematic experimentation.
The trial was enthusiastically followed by Aldo Pavari, then, its acclaimed and proven success was fully and very well commented by Orazio Ciancio, Roberto Mercurio and Susanna Nocentini. Finally, Mario Cantiani, after having measured 115 sample plots, produced a very convincing synthesis.
It is a fact that the green Douglas fir is at its best in the silicate soils of the Apennine system, between 600 and 1200 m above sea level, therefore on a rather wide portion of land. As a young tree, it grows 80 -120 cm in height per year, reaching a height of 35-40 meters at 50 years old. The testing of all other giant conifer species, with which the green Douglas fir intermingles in nature, was not successful. This suggests that the ecological conditions of the place of origin only provide early indications on the needs of the species, while (as the geneticist Fulvio Ducci points out) the success of an introduction is very dependent on the species' plasticity and specifically its individual genetic variability.
Among the indigenous conifers, the species to which the Douglas fir directly compares is the silver fir that, in comparison with its exotic competitor, develops optimally in a more limited environment. The fir, moreover, is always very prone to weather damage and especially damage from parasites. With the exception of the populations in Calabria, it shows poor individual variability. Moreover, rivers of ink have been written on the white fir recession in Europe. In this case, it must be said that the indigenous species seems less adapted to the environment than exotic species. Which is surprising: the conclusion or nature?
Douglas fir timber production is 1.5 times greater than that of the fir. Its timber has the same resistance but it is easier to plane. One of the strong points of "Douglas timber" is its pleasing appearance for use as exposed beams, and has become the standard for use in constructing habitable lofts.
The green Douglas fir, today, as well as in its historical experimental plots is used extensively in reforestation in Tuscany, Romagna and Calabria. Near Florence, the most impressive

plantation is the one surrounding the Sanctuary of Monte Senario.
Inventories fail to give a convincing figure of its spread in Italy. Orazio La Marca has estimated 15,000 hectares, still much less than England, Germany and France which (each one) more or less reach 300,000 hectares. To think that, in short order, first a professor with his assistant, then a ministry official, and finally a busful of landowners came from France to see the Tuscan facilities in 1966.
In conclusion, while forest production facilities financed by Fond Forestier National were humming along beyond the Alps, everything came to a stop in Italy, with abandoned fields being left to their natural spontaneous evolution. Many factors were at fault. Nevertheless, the foundation is in our absolute unwavering belief in the eternal and absolute free growth of an affluent society. Forestry is an art based on foresight. If the reasons for being far-sighted topple, there is no longer a need for forestry.