

# When Is a Pine Not a Pine?

B. June Hutchinson

Although it is commonly called the umbrella pine, the luxuriant *Sciadopitys verticillata* actually is not a pine. In fact, it possesses no immediate plant relatives, and its ancestry is more remote than that of most other conifers. The foliage is still another unusual aspect of this tree: it is comprised of two types of leaves. The dark green needles that grow in distinctive whorls at intervals along its branches are one type, and the small brown scales along the stems are another.

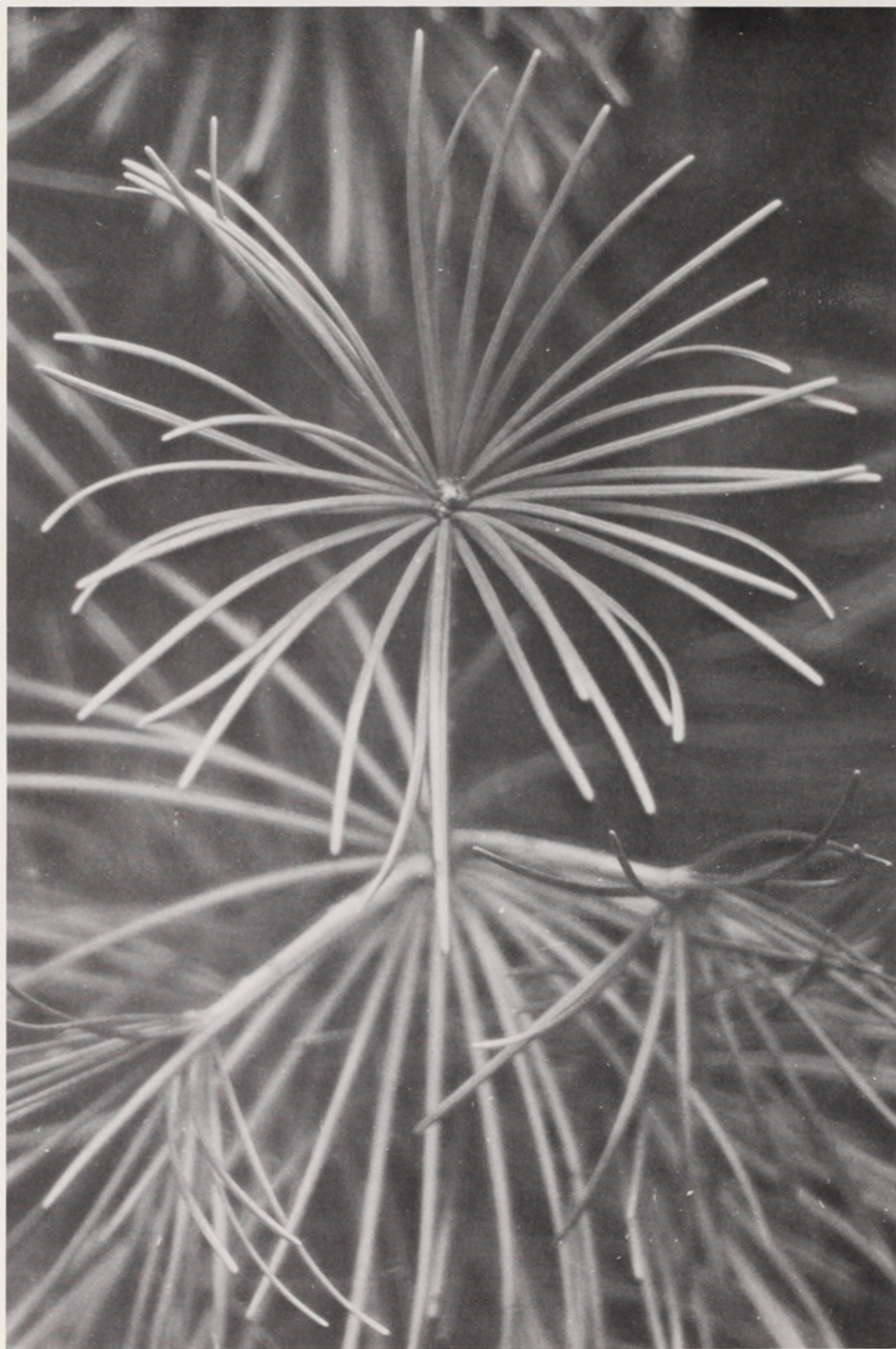
E. H. Wilson (1876–1930) called the umbrella pine “one of the most distinct of all conifers” in appearance. Planted as a landscape specimen in the Northeast, it forms a dense pyramid and retains its lower branches well into maturity, unlike many of the conifers. Wilson wrote that he saw the umbrella pine growing in the forests of Japan (to which it is native) as a tall, narrow-crowned tree up to 30 m in height, but in this country it is slow growing and reaches 8 m at most after 50 years.

This remarkable tree first became known to Europeans when the Swedish botanist Carl Peter Thunberg (1743–1828) published a description of it in his *Flora Japonica* (1784), a work based on his observations during a 15-month stay in Japan from 1775 to

1776. However, Thunberg’s mention of the new evergreen was largely overlooked by botanists since he described it as a species of the well-known genus *Taxus*. When German-born physician and botanist Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866) saw the tree, he realized it was unique. The description of *Sciadopitys verticillata* in his *Flora Japonica* (1842) excited plant enthusiasts. Yet it was not until nearly 20 years later that umbrella pines were successfully propagated in England by nurseryman John G. Veitch, who brought seeds from Japan in 1861. The following year the tree was grown for the first time in the United States at the Parsons Nursery in Flushing, New York. Although it is still not widely available in the United States, a few fine nurseries in New England sell the umbrella pine. Unfortunately, the long handling time in the nursery, due to slow growth, decrees a high price for these unusual plants.

Dr. Sidney Waxman, of the University of Connecticut, has introduced several cultivars of the umbrella pine, which have been propagated from cuttings. His article in the *International Plant Propagators’ Society Proceedings* (volume 28, p. 546–50) provides instruction on propagating by this method. The Arnold Arboretum has successfully propagated umbrella pines from seed. The seeds required three months to germinate regardless of pretreatment. Arboretum trees produce cones in alternate years.







As described by both C. S. Sargent and E. H. Wilson, the native habitat and plant companions of the umbrella pine can guide the use of the tree in the North American landscape. Wilson wrote that it usually occurs as a solitary tree or in small groves, scattered through dense forests of pine, fir, Hinoki cypress, hemlock, maple, magnolia, and katsura. Sargent reported finding it in association with native pines, particularly Japanese white pine (*Pinus parviflora*) and Japanese red pine (*P. densiflora*). In combination with the Japanese maple against an evergreen background, the umbrella pine is an exciting study in leaf contrasts and form for close-up viewing near a window or doorway. Another handsome grouping, which has textual appeal, occurs naturally in Japan: a small grove of umbrella pines in combination with hemlocks, accompanied by lower plantings of rhododendron and underplantings of *Shortia*. Mildly evocative of prehistoric landscapes and matched in boldness of foliage and evolutionary age, *Sciadopitys* and magnolia are effective landscape companions. With a *Magnolia × soulangeana* 'Brozzoni', for example, a small grove of three or more *Sciadopitys* is elegant, particularly if sited in front of other tall evergreens. These combinations can be used in several landscape applications, including border, edge, screening, and foundation plantings. The textural richness and symmetry of the umbrella pine are set off to good advantage in both formal gardens and the surroundings of contemporary houses. The form of this Japanese plant would not be suitable among the naturalistic groupings of plants in in-

formal country gardens, however. Umbrella pines are perfectly hardy in the Boston area and hold the dark green color of their thick, shiny needles through the coldest winters. Easy to grow and not susceptible to any serious diseases, they appreciate shelter from strong winds and some soil moisture. Planting sites should not be hot or dry but can be shaded.

Facts about the umbrella pine (*Sciadopitys verticillata*)

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Landscape	
Height	7.5 to 9 meters
Spread	4 to 5 m
Texture	Medium
Growth Rate	Slow
Hardiness	Zone 5
Family	Pinaceae
Native Range	Japan
Native Habitat	Scattered through dense forests of mixed hard and soft woods.
Introduced	1861

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Distinctive needles of the umbrella pine (*Sciadopitys verticillata*)

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