



Calocedrus decurrens

Champion Trees

By Dan Spear

I was exploring a new trail for me on my mountain bike ride recently in the Peninsular Range Mountains of San Diego County, California, and came across an enormous *Calocedrus decurrens*, incense cedar, by far the largest I had ever seen.

I did what any chronic conehead would do; had a friend stand in front of the tree and took a picture of it to share with other coneheads. I emailed the picture and mentioned that maybe it was a champion, to which the response was: “What’s a champion?” I was surprised these conifer experts did not know, but, frankly, I didn’t know much more. So, I did a little reading, and I’m going to share with you what I found. With any hope, some of you readers can further educate the rest of us, as I am sure there are experts in our midst.

There is something in human nature which makes us admire and revere champions; the biggest, tallest, longest, and the largest crown spread. In some areas, it is taken to extremes. The company I work for is headquartered near the world’s steepest railway, longest footbridge, and tallest underground waterfall. Our competitive nature pushes us in many different directions. Many people can name the tallest mountain in the world or in the United States, but how about the second tallest? Probably not. Everybody loves a winner, as the saying goes. Well, it is the same for trees. There are National Champion trees, and each state has a State Champion program, and it is not just for conifers, but other types of trees too, totaling more than 780 species.

American Forests is the originator of the National Big Tree Program (www.americanforests.org). American Forests runs the database, The National Register of Big Trees, listing more than 750 National Champions. It all started in 1940 with their magazine article asking people to find and save the largest trees. Decades before the Green Movement, there were tree-huggers concerned about the demise of the record-holding trees. By 1941, there were 77 Champions listed.

A champion tree has the largest total number of the following measurements: circumference in inches + height in feet + $\frac{1}{4}$ crown spread in feet, per

species. Cultivars and hybrids are not included. American Forests has as a very useful publication called *American Forests Champion Trees Measuring Guidelines*, (www.americanforests.org/bigtrees/big-tree-measuring-guidelines) showing how to measure it when you find that monster pine, spruce, or hemlock. Like so many things, the more you begin to learn about a subject, the more you realize how little you know. The same goes for measuring trees to get accurate measurements when it is leaning, on a slope, asymmetrical, or all of the above. It appears to get rather complicated, so an affinity for math would be helpful. If I had a true contender, I would be calling somebody at American Forests for assistance! Help! An additional fun feature of these champions is the possibility that you may find one. Somewhat like witch's brooms and seedlings we find which may lead to new cultivars; searching parks, cemeteries, and our forests may lead to the next national or state champion.

It was interesting and surprising to read about these national and state champion trees, how large they are, and where they are located. A good many are at the park which surrounds the California State Capital in Sacramento, and several were in my home town of Orange, including the current National Champion *Pinus pinea*, Italian stone pine, which is listed at 239 inches in diameter, 62 feet high, with a crown spread of 105 feet.

So, was that beautiful, huge incense cedar I found on my ride a potential champion? Not even close. The current National Champion was nominated in 2011 and was found in Josephine, Oregon. It measured 484 inches in circumference, 138 feet tall, and a crown spread of 45 feet, for a total of 633 points, bumping out the previous National Champion from California at 627 points. Now that is a Champion! 🌲

