

Auctioneer Brian  
Jacob with a choice  
*Cedrus deodara*  
'Feelin' Sunny'



## Behind the Scenes: Preparing for a Memorable ACS Auction

By David Olszyk | Photos by Janice LeCocq

People join the American Conifer Society for many reasons. Whether it is access to fine gardens, engaging in the camaraderie of other enthusiasts, or adhering to the causes the Society supports, we come together at events and meetings to share our common interest in these fabulous plants. My main reason for joining was to gain access to the strange and unusual conifer cultivars we regularly see at plant auctions. I share the sentiment of legendary plantsman Larry Stanley when I say that my favorite conifer is one that I haven't seen yet. I learned during my first ACS meeting in the early 2000's that an ACS plant auction was the ideal venue to satisfy my interest.

Over the years, I've had the good fortune to rise through the ranks of ACS leadership and to be able to guide (gently) and to influence the success of more than a few ACS plant auctions.

A major first key to a successful auction is to have good people working

for you. In the Western Region we have a small team of Conifer Acquisition Specialists. These are folks who are senior members of the Society and have spent many years forging meaningful relationships with the great conifer nurserymen of Oregon and Washington. The



Sandy Scott  
contemplating  
choices in the  
Silent Auction

“Specialists” know all of their quirks and nuances and are quite adept at convincing them to donate great plants for “the good of the cause”.

When I became the Western Region’s President, my instructions to my acquisition team were quite brief. I simply asked them to focus on “conifers which can’t be found in garden centers anywhere”. A skill which goes hand-in-hand with knowing the growers is being aware of their “back rooms”, greenhouses which are tucked away in remote corners and which contain the absolute gems of the trade—plants under evaluation or extremely hard to produce in commercial quantities. These are items which generate considerable interest during the auctions.

Another source of auction excitement is a plant making its world debut during one of our events. We are lucky to have a couple of the West’s top witch’s broom hunters on our team. We can always count on them to find several new cultivars during the winter broom hunts. A successful broom hunt results in successful propagations named and hardened off just in time for a regional or national meeting. *Abies grandis* ‘Mrs. Collier’s Pet Duck’ and *Picea sitchensis* ‘Uncle Wiley’ are examples of brooms harvested during the winter of 2013/14, successfully propagated, named and auctioned off with great enthusiasm during the Western Regional meeting in August of the same year.

Probably the highest level of excitement attainable at a plant auction is the ability to bid on and win a provisionally-named conifer along with the naming rights. At a recent auction, one of our growers donated a



Michael Jolly checking to see if he's been outbid

plant previously known simply as *Pinus mugo* [seedling selection no. 3]. This plant's lucky winner happened to be a new member to the Society who quickly named it for her young grandson. There is no doubt that this experience will result in an enthusiastic, active, life-long ACS member and conifer lover.

There are times when a hint of melancholy graces the auction. Such was the case in the most-recent Northeastern Regional meeting when the organizers were fortunate enough to obtain conifer specimens donated from the Dennis Dodge collection. Not only were plants made available which were unknown to most of the attendees, but the fact that they once belonged to one of the legends of the trade made them even more desirable and helped to make the meeting one of the best in recent memory.

Although the bulk of the work involved with ACS auctions lies in the careful acquisition of the plants, the key to facilitate the exchange of a great conifer with a generous donation to the ACS is in the talents of the auctioneer. The best plant auctioneers are those who are knowledgeable about the products and can properly pronounce those strange Latin binomials and the at-times unpronounceable European cultivar names. Most

important is the auctioneer's ability to "generate heat". It's one thing to identify a cultivar as a "nice, dwarf bun-shaped selection which will be a nice addition to a rock garden"; yet quite another to convey the story of an individual risking life and limb climbing 30' into a fir tree in Minnesota in the middle of January to collect a witch's broom precariously dangling from the end of branch. Which presentation is likely going to create the higher strike price?



Ken and Elena Jordan with treasures from the Silent Auction

The skillful auctioneer will also be very adept at monitoring and controlling the audience. Nothing will drag down the group and put an overall damper on the evening more quickly than a single attendee with deep pockets and an irrational desire to win every plant. There is a fine line between raising money for the Society and turning people off on the

Kym Pokorny stayed focused and got the one she really wanted.



experience with the opinion that our auctions are only for those who are financially well off. The best way to diffuse the potential for hurt feelings is a quick, friendly briefing before the action starts and witty dialog during the event in case one or two people try to dominate.

As you finish reading this article, the ACS Western Region's Conifer Acquisition team is hard at work combing the grounds of the West's top growers with the goal of assembling a selection of the most toe-curling conifers ever to be offered to the membership. If owning an eclectic collection of rare conifers is among your personal goals, the upcoming national meeting in Sonoma County, California, is not to be missed.



Maryann Lewis. Wine, tree and credit card—what a great combination!

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