

Robert Miller: Don't pick that princess pine

By Robert Miller

Published 12:00 am EST, Saturday, December 16, 2017

Many decades ago, I went into the woods, picked princess pine — six-inch high evergreens that could blanket the ground — and helped fashion it into the family Christmas wreath.

Many decades before that, my father told me, he'd earned Christmas present money making princess pine wreathes and selling them to his neighbors.

Today, when gathering the holiday greens, I turn to spruce and white pine and holly and even mountain laurel in my yard. Princess pine, I leave be.

This isn't a matter of changing tastes. It's because princess pine — which, in its heyday helped create the world's coal reserves — is hard to find.

"My mother used to pick it for Christmas," said Stephen Paproski, owner of the Paproski Tree Farm in Newtown. "We used to go into the woods and pick it. But I don't know when I've seen (it) lately."

"I heard they used to do that," said Tyson Averill of Averill Farm in Washington, which sells Christmas trees. "We don't do that anymore."

"There's not much of it left," said Bill Hill, owner of Warrup's Farm in Redding, which sells Christmas trees along with maple syrup and other produce. "You'd have to go way north to find it."

And if there are groves of princess pine left in the woods near you, the word is: Leave it alone. Please.

"It's not illegal to pick it. It's not listed as endangered," said David Yih, president of the Connecticut Botanical Society. "But we discourage people from picking any plant that is wild. People don't always know what species they're finding."

The problem with picking princess pine, which people also call ground pine, is that it's very slow to grow and equally slow to regenerate once it's been picked over.

"They only grow a few inches a year," said Jeff Ward, forester for the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station.

Clear away a few square yards of it and it may not come back.

"If people picked enough for 30 or 40 wreaths, that's a lot of plants. Over time it could threaten the survival of those populations," Yih said.

Princess pine is a member of the family of club mosses. Despite their name, they're not particularly mossy.

They have roots, which spread horizontally. Princess pine shoots grow from those roots with several plants sharing one root system. Pick one and you damage them all.

Like ferns and mushrooms, they also reproduce by giving off spores, which the wind carries to different spots in the woods. It can take several years for those spores to establish themselves as plants.

Those spores are laden with oil. Dried, and lit, they can ignite and spark.

Which is why early photographers, before they had flash bulbs, used to use trays of club moss spores to light their shots. (Think of movies showing 19th century photographers with box cameras and explosive flashes.) They were also used in magic acts and theatrical extravaganzas.

It's also why spore-laden princess pine may not be the best thing to hang in a swag over your fireplace mantle.

"They're incredibly combustible," Ward said.

There's another reason to leave princess pine alone. It's been around for many millennia. It belongs here.

In the Carboniferous Period — the geological period that extended from 350 million to 222 million years ago — club mosses grew six feet thick and 50 to 60 feet tall, Ward said. They dominated the landscape.

That ancient landscape was swampy, and its tropical air was rich with oxygen — 35 percent compared to 21 percent today. It was the realm of giant insects — six-foot long centipedes, giant cockroaches and dragonflies with two-foot wingspans.

That boggy, buggy plant-laden world ended up as the layers of sediment that created the coal reserves of North America and Europe. The tiny princess pines growing in the state are a remnant of that much different world.

If it's departing the Connecticut scene, it may be because humans just picked too much of it.

But Hill, of Warrup's Farm, said the cool damp ground that club mosses need to thrive may be departing as well, thanks to climate change.

"It's getting hotter," he said.

Luckily, Christmas tree farms have trimmings which make great wreaths.

"If I have a pile, I let people help themselves," said Al Romano, of the Highview Tree Farm in Bethel.

Ward, of the experiment station, said he buys a tree that's too tall, trims off the lower branches, and uses that for wreath-making.

"We're thrifty Yankees," he said.

Contact Robert Miller at earthmattersrgm@gmail.com