

Tales of the Wasatch

In October, when the aspen leaves have fallen in Big Cottonwood Canyon, two stands of bright yellow-orange Larch trees still glow like giant candles on the north-facing slope adjacent to Spruces Campground. It's the site of the old Wasatch Nursery, which operated from 1906-1920 to grow seedlings for the newly created Salt Lake Forest Reserve.

The nursery was charged with conducting "urgent forestry experiments" to determine which tree species could grow in the canyons. These Larch stands are a remnant of the Wasatch Nursery, having survived over 100 years. Larch trees are one of the few conifer species that shed their needles in late autumn. They're the only known Larch in the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest.

In 1907, the *Salt Lake Herald* reported that seeds of Japanese Larch were sown at the Wasatch Nursery. In 1912, the *Herald* reported that the Wasatch National Forest received a 2-ounce package of "high toned and aristocratic" Siberian Larch seeds from the estate of Count Max von Sivers of Roemershof, Russia, to be planted at the nursery. In 1913, the *Herald* reported that Count von Siver's Larch seeds had sprouted, and were to be planted that summer. They would be the first Larch trees in Utah. The Forest Service has not verified which Larch species have taken root in Big Cottonwood because they were also collecting Western Larch seeds during this period. There are smaller stands around the canyon. Have you been lucky enough to spot them?



Photo by permission of the US Forest Service

The Wasatch Nursery operated from 1905 to 1920. It was one of the Forest Service's first major projects.

Larch Trees of Big Cottonwood



Photo by permission of the US Forest Service

Volunteers tend the tiny Wasatch Nursery seedlings that have grown into the giants that surround us today.

Larch trees aren't native to Utah, but have survived the great experiment. They look like evergreens, but lose needles each year after turning bright yellow-orange. The yellow needles stay on the trails below all year.

In 1900, there were few trees left in the canyon. Erosion poured mud and rock into the creek, causing drinking water problems downstream. Local residents determined that the best way to provide clean drinking water was to replant trees in the canyon.

So, the Wasatch Tree Nursery was started in 1905. It operated for 15 years until 1920. Many types of trees were planted to determine what could survive in this canyon. Take a look around the forest. You'll see pine, fir, and spruce trees of all varieties. Volunteers from the city worked diligently to revive the forest by growing and replanting over 250,000 seedlings. Nothing on this scale had been accomplished before.

Then in 1921, the Forest Service opened a Community Camp there. Over 50 platform tents and eventually rental cabins were installed. Only \$7 per week provided tent rental and transportation from Salt Lake for valley residents escaping the summer heat. During winter, it later became a winter sports area, complete with a toboggan run, ice skating rink, and a ski jump. The Spruces Campground area holds a fond and grateful place in the hearts of many families in Utah for so many reasons.