

How giant sequoia trees got to Southern California

By MARK LANDIS | historyinca@yahoo.com The Sun
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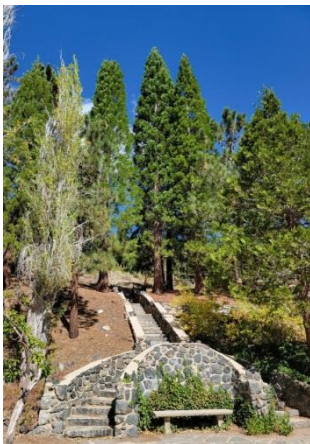
As a child, my parents took me to see General Sherman, the tree in Sequoia National Park, and I became awestricken by the sheer size and magnificence of giant sequoias.

As an adult, still enamored with the trees, I bought a mail order giant sequoia tree a few years ago, thinking I'd be the first guy on the block to have one of these titans growing in his yard.

The little sequoia wasn't much more than a spindly twig when it arrived, and I was determined to nurture it until it became sturdy enough to plant in my yard.

As a resident of the San Gabriel Mountains, I thought my plan would make me a pioneer in introducing these majestic giants to the mountains of Southern California.

My dream of becoming Johnny Sequoiaseed was quickly dashed when a visiting friend told me that I already had two 30-foot sequoias growing in my backyard.



Giant sequoias -- the three tall trees at the center -- are at the Big Pines Visitors Center, near Wrightwood. These trees growing along the center's nature trail were planted in the 1970s. (Photo by Mark Landis)

With minimal knowledge of tree species, I had always thought my near-perfectly cone-shaped conifers were simply garden-variety cedars. I asked my neighbor who happened to be a biology professor at Cal State San Bernardino, and he confirmed that my existing trees were indeed, giant sequoias. Additionally, he told me there were several other non-native giant sequoias of similar size growing in the area.

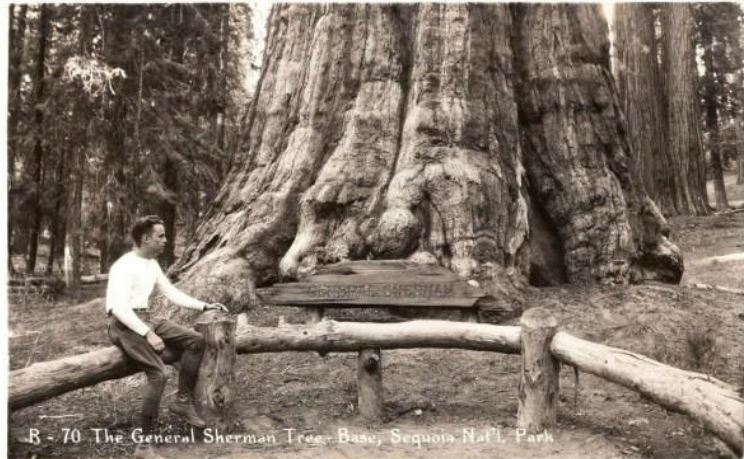
My curiosity about the local sequoias was piqued, so I began to research the possibility of other giant sequoia enclaves in Southern California. It quickly became apparent that the giant sequoia was not only large and magnificent, but extremely robust, and highly adaptable to a variety of growing zones.

The trees are only native to the Sierra Nevada of California, with the southernmost natural grove located about 13 miles northwest of Kernville. They typically grow in altitudes of 4,600 to 7,000 feet, and are usually found in humid climates, with dry summers and snowy winters.

My research led me to a 2012 paper written by Rudolf and Mena Schmid that described a stand of giant sequoias located in the upper Hall Canyon area of the San Jacinto Mountains in Riverside County. While hiking, the Schmidts found a small grove of sequoias that was not only thriving, but actually expanding with new seedlings and saplings.

The Schmidts began investigating the grove and found that the U.S. Forest Service had planted the sequoias in an effort to revegetate that area after a fire in 1974. In 2012, they found more than 150 trees, with seedlings, saplings, and young adults ranging from a few inches, to 20 feet tall. They also found indications that similar revegetation efforts had occurred in the San Bernardino and San Gabriel mountains.

A postcard of the General Sherman Tree, in Sequoia National Park, circa 1920. General Sherman sequoia is the largest known living single-stem tree on earth, and it's estimated to be between 2,200 and 2,700 years old. (From the collection of Mark Landis)



In the early 1900s, the U.S. Forest Service realized the resilient nature of the sequoias, and they began considering them as a robust alternative to trees in other California climates.

In 1948, Andrew McCornack, a farm adviser in the area, was recommending planting giant sequoias in larger yards in the dry, low elevations of the San Bernardino Valley, and local nurseries were stocking and special-ordering the trees.

Perhaps the biggest expansion of giant sequoias in Southern California began in the late 1960s, when the U.S. Forest Service determined that many native trees in the local mountains were being killed off by smog and bark beetles.

The Forest Service developed a plan to cut down thousands — 3,000 to 4,000 — dead and dying Jeffrey and ponderosa pines in the Crestline and Running Springs area damaged by smog and bark beetles. In 1971, dead trees on more than 1,000 acres were replaced with seedling sequoias and sugar pines.

In the 1970s, the U.S. Forest Service was providing giant sequoias, and other resilient pines, to the public for minimal cost, to aid in reforestation.

This giant sequoia at the Big Pines Visitors Center near Wrightwood were probably planted in the 1970s. (Photo by Mark Landis)



A private campaign to revegetate the forest in the San Bernardino Mountains took place in 2003, when the Rim of The World Masonic Lodge began distributing 30,000 giant sequoias seedlings for \$1.50 to \$2 each.

Today, there is a popular grove of giant sequoias at Heap's Peak Arboretum, on Highway 18. The Sequoia Trail at Heap's Peak Arboretum is a ¾-mile-long trail that winds through a variety of giant sequoias and native species.

The Oak Glen Preserve in the San Bernardino Mountains is home to a grove of about 10 giant sequoias planted 50 to 130 years ago by ranchers, and about 300 giant sequoias planted by the Wildlands Conservancy in 2003. The preserve is located at 39611 Oak Glen Road, Building 10, Oak Glen.

There are several giant sequoias at the Big Pines Visitors Center on Highway 2, near Wrightwood. They can be seen on the nature trail adjacent to the main building.

Retired U.S. Forest Service patrol Captain Ken Harp said he planted several giant sequoias near the Big Pines fire station around 1977. Those trees are now beautiful large specimens that can be seen from the road on Big Pines Highway, about 600 feet west of Highway 2.

Giant sequoias have been planted in many areas of the United States, including Alaska, Delaware, Florida, and Hawaii. They have also been exported to nearly every continent in the world, and the giants are growing in Europe, South America, and Asia.

Giant sequoias were introduced in Britain by William Lobb in the 1850s. Many of those giants are now large, mature trees that are well-known, and beloved curiosities in parks, landmarks, and private residences.

I bought my young giant sequoia from Welker's Grove Nursery, in the Sierra Nevada, near Shaver Lake. Sadly, the nursery was badly damaged by the 2020 Creek Fire and it is not selling trees at this time.

Joe Welker's passion for the giant trees also came from a visit to the big trees as a boy, and he's loved them ever since. According to Welker, "The giant sequoias do better in the Western United States due to the drier, warmer climate, but if you keep the soil clean, they will grow almost anywhere."

With the various plantings, and the campaign in the 1970s to revegetate Southern California's mountain forests with giant sequoia, it's likely there are many more individual trees and groves in the region.

Thanks to the local revegetation efforts, these beautiful monarchs can be enjoyed in the mountains of Southern California, and will likely be around for hundreds, or even thousands of years.