

*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*

[Synonyms : *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* var. *caespitosa*, *Sequoia glyptostroboides*]

**DAWN REDWOOD** is a deciduous conifer. Native to central and south-western China (eastern Szechwan and north-eastern Hupeh) it has feathery ranks of needle-like leaves that turn from pinkish-light brown to reddish-bronze in Autumn.

It is also known as Chinese mammoth tree, *Chinesisches Rotholz* (German), Living fossil, *Metasekvoja čínska* (Slovak), *Metasekvoje čínská* (Czech), *Shui shan* (Chinese), *Urweltmammutbaum* (German), *Watercipres* (Dutch), Water fir, and Water larch.

Like the swamp cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) it is the slender branches themselves (which bear the needle-like leaves) that fall off in Winter.

The flowers are pollinated by wind.

*Glyptostroboides* is made up of the genus name *Glyptostrobos* and Greek *-oides* (like) components meaning ‘like the Chinese water cypress (*Glyptostrobos pensilis*, the only species in this genus)’.

It is thought that these trees (they existed when dinosaurs were roaming the planet and are believed to have been widely distributed in temperate regions of the Northern Hemisphere about 130 million years ago) can live for as long as 450 years.

The 1940s discovery of the continued existence of these trees seems to have been a result of a series of independent far-flung events. In the same year Shigeru Miki (1901-1974) named this new genus from fossil specimens *Metasequoia* and a Chinese botanist, named Kan, found what he thought was trees of an unknown species in the province of Sichuan. At the end of 1941 however China entered the Second World War and it was not until 1945 that samples of the trees could be examined. Separately in 1946 a noted Chinese botanist who specialised in trees Dr. H.H. Hu (1894-1968) of the Institute of Biology at Beijing saw a paper published by Shigeru Miki. This included reference to a 5,000,000 year old Pliocene fossil tree in its discussion – and shortly after reading it Dr. Hu received material from an unidentified living tree in China that matched this fossil’s description. The fossil was not extinct. With the support of Harvard University’s Arnold Arboretum Dr. Hu set up an expedition to the remote areas in the Sichuan-Hupeh region in question. There he not only collected seeds but also learnt that local farmers used the trees to feed their livestock and called them *shui-san* (water larch). Seeds were then dispatched to the West in 1946 – just before the ‘bamboo curtain’ fell between China and the rest of the World.

Dawn redwood is now cultivated as an ornamental in the East and West. Apparently it is a fairly familiar sight in gardens in Calcutta and in the West it is sometimes grown as a street tree too.

Authorities note that the tree has an extensive root system and it has been planted in China in places where it can stabilise riverbanks and paddy field walls.