

Features

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“Spruce” Up the Winter Garden

Andrew Bunting

Today—like with many types of plants—conifers, too, are experiencing both popularity and a renaissance in the garden. Conifers are great as a specimen or focal point in the garden, and especially in the winter landscape, can make a great statement.

Smaller or dwarf conifers are perfect for those with minimal space and many make great additions to container gardens, and yet others are really almost unequaled for creating living hedges. For example, in my home garden, I extensively use Thuja Green Giant for different hedging needs. In one part of the garden, I let it get about 20-ft. tall where it effectively screens a two-story house. In my 40-ft. by 100-ft. vegetable garden, I allowed it to reach about 7-ft. tall as I prune it yearly with hedge shears to maintain essentially a “green fence.” And there are diminutive selections that include Junior Giant, which reaches 15- to 20-ft. tall and Baby Giant, only reaching 14-ft. tall with beautifully textured foliage.

More Attributes for Gardeners

Of the very many upright arborvitae cultivars, one of my favorites is *Thuja occidentalis* Degroot's Spire. As the name would suggest, it's very upright and “spire-like.” Over time each plant can develop multiple “spires,” which only adds to the architecture of the plant. An arborvitae with outstanding golden foliage reaching 10 to 12 ft. with a narrow habit and hardy to USDA Zones 5a to 8b is Forever Goldy. This will make a stunning winter specimen and, when young, is a good choice for winter containers. Pancake has dark green foliage that will turn bluish in the winter. Reaching only 12 to 18 in., it's perfect for the small courtyard garden or container planting.

For a long time, I've been a fan of *Cryptomeria japonica* Yoshino, which is both a great screening tree as well as a specimen, reaching 50- to 60-ft. tall in USDA Zones 6 to 8. Over time, however, it can become a bit of a nuisance in the garden, whereby it drops a lot of the dying and browning inner branches. Black Dragon has the same dark green foliage, but only reaches 12-ft. tall with a spread of 5 ft. Like most cryptomerias, it's also tolerant of a fair amount of shade. Dragon Prince and Dragon Warrior are rounded diminutive evergreen shrubs that are perfect for containers. Selected through the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Gold Medal Program, Globosa Nana is a highly textured, low-growing selection of the Japanese red cedar that's good for foundation plantings.

Let's Talk Pines

There are so many wonderful pines. The white pine, *Pinus strobus*, remains a ubiquitous evergreen tree in many landscapes throughout the country and can get very picturesque with age, but does suffer greatly from wind and heavy wet snow impacts. Domino is a hybrid between the white pine and a Mexican pine, *Pinus ayacahuite*. Reaching only 8-ft. tall over 10 years, it has soft needles with a bluish cast. The lacebark pine, *Pinus bungeana*, remains one of the best pines for amazing winter interest. Over time the bark will develop a camouflage-like look

with patches of white, dark green, beige, plum, etc. And over a longer period of time the bark will become increasingly a uniform alabaster-white.



Pictured far left: Cryptomeria japonica Yoshino at Chanticleer Garden in Wayne, Pennsylvania. Photo Credit: Andrew Bunting.

Middle: Chilean native Araucaria araucana, also called the monkey puzzle tree.

Near left: Chamaecyparis obtusa Night Light has striking golden foliage. Photo Credit: Southern Living Plant Collection.

Also, selected by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's Gold Medal Program is the dwarf hinoki cypress, *Chamaecyparis obtusa* Nana Gracilis. This very dark green, pyramidal conifer is very slow growing. It thrives in most light conditions, but is also one of the few conifers that can tolerate low light conditions. In a shady corner it would contrast beautifully with an underplanting of the Hakone grass, *Hakonechloa macra* Aureola or a chartreuse leaf host like June. *Chamaecyparis obtusa* Night Light has a rounded habit and striking golden foliage.

More Options for Winter Interest

Entire books have been written on junipers. There are many species and dozens, if not more, cultivars. They range from groundcovers to shrubs to trees. A couple of notable standouts include Juniperus Grey Owl, a spreading shrub-like juniper that's thought to be a hybrid. It has striking grey-blue foliage and over time can reach 6- to 8-ft. tall and spread over 10 ft. It's a beautiful addition to the winter landscape where it makes a great combination with many of the dogwoods with colored stems such as Cardinal. *Juniperus virginiana* Emerald Sentinel is an upright emerald-green selection of the Eastern red cedar. This native juniper is very hardy and can tolerate myriad soils. It also develops very attractive blue fruits that are food for the native bird populations.

There's no conifer as noble and regal as the firs, *Abies*. However, many firs can struggle with heat and humidity, as well as poorly drained soil. The Japanese fir, *Abies firma*, is fairly tolerant of many of these conditions. It has bright green needles and will reach 50- to 60-ft. tall. The Korean fir, *Abies koreana*, has darker foliage and has striking, stout, upward-facing blue-purple cones.

One of the most remarkable of all the conifers is a Chilean native, the monkey puzzle tree, *Araucaria araucana*. It has an amazing open architecture where each stem is covered in very sharp needles. Over time it will become upright and pyramidal with a rounded top. It definitely struggles in the heat and humidity of the East Coast, however, I'm seeing more and more of them attempted in the landscape. It'll do reasonably well in sand soils like those found in parts of New Jersey. For seasonal winter interest they're simply stunning. On a recent visit to Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, I saw several being used in a display.

This is merely a snapshot of the many, many great conifers that are available and can be used for permanent and seasonal plantings. **GP**

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