

Outstanding Conifers

This group of trees and shrubs is beautiful year round, but shines brightest in winter.

BY RITA PELCZAR

FROM SPRING THROUGH FALL, conifers assume supporting roles in many gardens, providing a pleasing backdrop for displays of more colorful seasonal flowers and fruit. But conifers are an amazingly varied group of plants; many offer year-round interest and deserve prominent placement in a garden. These plants offer so much diversity and appeal, regardless of the season, that some gardeners devote entire beds to them. To help homeowners with selection, the American Conifer Society (ACS) has developed a series of public reference gardens to display conifer specimens (see “Conifer Reference Gardens,” page 23).

Whether you are a conifer connoisseur or not, once the weather turns cold and fair-weather plants fade into the background, the range of colors, textures, and forms of these plants becomes vividly apparent. Conifers can transform a dull winter scene into one of breathtaking beauty.



The showy buds of *Pinus mugo* var. *pumilio* top densely spaced branches with deep green needles. It develops very slowly, forming a mound, three to five feet tall and six to 10 feet wide in 10 years, making it a good choice for smaller landscapes, rock gardens, and containers.



Top left: *Juniperus* ×‘Grey Owl’ produces abundant berrylike cones that show off well against the blue-green needles. Top right: The bright yellow spring needles of *Thuja occidentalis* ‘Golden Tuffet’ mature to orange with a touch of lime green. Above left: Before the deciduous needles of dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) drop in autumn, they turn a spectacular bronze. Above right: *Abies nordmanniana* ‘Golden Spreader’ is a bright gold selection of Nordmann fir that prefers a partly shaded site. A slow grower, it will reach four to five feet tall and wide in 10 years.

WAY BEYOND GREEN

Most conifers bear cones—although yews and junipers produce fleshy cones that look more like berries—and are evergreen, that is, they retain their leaves throughout the year (there are a few deciduous exceptions). The range of their foliage color extends well beyond green—including shades of gray, blue, gold, and purple—and some selections are variegated.

While color is consistent throughout the year for some cultivars, winter’s cold accentuates the hues of others. In the heat of summer, the awllike needles of *Cryptomeria*

japonica ‘Globosa Nana’ are yellow-green but turn bluish green as winter approaches. The yellow needles of *Thuja occidentalis* ‘Golden Tuffet’ mature to a golden orange, a color that is retained throughout winter.

Pinus mugo ‘Sunshine’ is a brightly variegated selection of the dwarf mountain pine with creamy yellow bands on green needles. “My older specimens growing in full sun saw the variegation turn to white, which was even more spectacular, and never did even one needle burn in our very hot June,” says Talon Buchholz, President of Buchholz Nursery in Gaston, Oregon,



Top: *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana Gracilis' grows to about 10 feet tall and develops a dense pyramidal habit. "The plant just looks expensive," says Bill Thomas, executive director of Chanticleer garden in Wayne, Pennsylvania, who adds that it is slow-growing and gets better with age. **Above:** A great choice for rock gardens, *Picea abies* 'Little Gem' grows 12 inches tall and 18 inches across in 10 years. Its bright green needles make a stunning contrast with darker green conifers in a mixed planting.

CONIFER REFERENCE GARDENS

The best way to decide which conifers you want to add to your garden is to see them growing in a landscape setting where the conditions are similar to yours. With this in mind, the American Conifer Society has established a series of more than 40 "Conifer Reference Gardens" in different parts of the country to educate the public about growing conifers in their specific geographic region, to introduce the public to new varieties of conifers, and to demonstrate the ways conifers can be used in home landscapes.

To qualify as a reference garden, the garden must be open to the public and must include a minimum of 30 different conifers representing at least eight genera. The conifers must be properly maintained and accurately labeled. Through these displays, gardeners can compare varieties and easily identify ones of interest. You can find a list of these Reference Gardens at <https://conifersociety.org/conifers/reference-gardens>. —R.P.

Sources

- Broken Arrow Nursery**, Hamden CT. www.brokenarrownursery.com.
- Conifer Kingdom**, Silverton, OR. www.coniferkingdom.com.
- Singing Tree Gardens Nursery**, McKinleyville, CA. www.singtree.com.
- Sunnyside Nursery**, Marysville, WA. www.sunnysidenursery.net.

Resources

- American Conifer Society**, www.conifersociety.org.
- Gardening with Conifers** by Adrian and Richard Bloom. Firefly Books, Buffalo, New York, 2017.
- Growing Conifers—The Complete Illustrated Gardening and Landscaping Guide** by John J. Abers and David E. Perry. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island, BC, Canada, 2021.
- Timber Press Pocket Guide to Conifers** by Richard L. Bitner. Timber Press, Portland, Oregon, 2010.



Above: The form of some conifers changes as they mature. “*Pinus parviflora* ‘Catherine Elizabeth’ starts as a dwarf, irregular-globose selection of Japanese white pine that, with age, will open up, assuming more of a sculpted, wind-swept structure,” says Michael Larkin, ACS Northeast Region president. Growing to 16 inches tall and 24 inches wide in 10 years, it’s “a great plant for a hypertufa trough container.”

Left: Although the weeping white spruce (*Picea glauca* ‘Pendula’) is not new, “it has regained popularity over the last several years,” says Byron Baxter, ACS Central Region president. “The growth habit is vertical with weeping branches held close to the trunk. Structures such as houses always present architectural opportunities for plants that grow straight and vertical.”

where ‘Sunshine’ has grown two feet tall by three feet wide in 10 years.

The cones or fruit of some conifers contribute additional color. The female cones of the deodar cedar (*Cedrus deodara*) are three to four inches long and soft blue-green. As they age, they turn reddish brown. The bright red berrylike female cones of *Taxus baccata* ‘Green Column’ stand out against the deep green needles of this fastigate dwarf. In addition to its gray-green needles, *Picea pungens* ‘Ruby Teardrops’, a new dwarf Colorado spruce, “is famous for a preponderance of small, erect ruby-colored cones in early spring that mature to light brown and dangle with age,” says Buchholz.

TEXTURE AND FORM

Conifer textures are a study in contrast. While needles are the rule when it comes to conifer foliage, they range from the tiny scales of arborvitae (*Thuja* spp.) to the lanky, eight- to 18-inch needles of the longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*). Needles of the Colorado blue spruce (*Picea pungens*) are stiff and spiky, while the tiny scales of the Hinoki false cypress (*Chamaecyparis*

obtusa) are arranged to form soft, flat fans.

From sharply pyramidal or tightly globose to gracefully weeping or low and spreading, conifer forms also run the gamut. Cultivar names such as ‘Compacta’, ‘Prostrate Beauty’, and ‘Globosa’ offer clues to the form. Some of the weeping selections, such as *Cedrus atlantica* ‘Glauc Pendula’, require staking in order to develop a strong leader.

SIZE OPTIONS

While many suburban yards are too small to include a full-sized Norway spruce (*Picea abies*) or dawn redwood (*Metsequoia glyptostroboides*), there are varieties of these and other conifers with more diminutive habits that fit better in gardens with limited space.

“Imagine a dawn redwood that only gets to be about five to six feet tall,” says Michael Larkin, ACS Northeast Region president, referring to the dwarf selection *M. glyptostroboides* ‘Schirrmann’s Nordlicht’. The color of the variegation on its deciduous foliage varies between yellow to cream depending on sun exposure, and it turns russet brown in fall. “This conifer grows exceptionally well in my Zone 7 Pennsylvania garden. It looks

great under-planted with perennial *Geranium* ‘Rozanne,’” says Larkin.

To help distinguish the little conifers from the big ones, the ACS has established four categories of conifers based on their rate of growth and size (in any direction). Miniatures grow less than one inch per year, and after 10 years are less than 12 inches. Dwarf conifers grow one to six inches per year and reach one to six feet after 10 years. Intermediates produce six to 12 inches of annual growth and attain a size of six to 15 feet after 10 years. Any conifer beyond that is considered large.

We asked several conifer experts to recommend cultivars for suburban landscapes in different parts of the country, with a focus on small- to medium-sized plants with exceptional winter appeal. Some of them are shown on these pages. Additional recommendations appear on the opposite page. 🌿

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MORE CONIFEROUS WINTER BEAUTIES

Name	Height/Spread (in 10 years)	Characteristics	USDA Hardiness Zones
<i>Abies balsamea</i> 'Piccolo'	12 in./16 in.	Dark green needles with dense, dwarf form; good for rock gardens.	3–6
<i>Chamaecyparis lawsoniana</i> 'Wissel's Saguaro'	6 ft./ 2 ft.	Narrow upright habit with contorted branches that resemble saguaro cactus; blue-green needles.	5–9
<i>Chamaecyparis obtusa</i> 'Gemstone'	12 in./ 8–12 in.	Irregular conelike habit; looks like a wizard's hat; slow growing.	5–8
<i>Cryptomeria japonica</i> 'Araucarioides'	10 ft./15 ft.	Irregular conical form with medium green, drooping, snakelike branches.	6–9
<i>Cryptomeria japonica</i> 'Little Champion'	6 ft./6 ft.	Globe-shaped dwarf with curved branchlets and tightly spaced needles.	6–9
<i>Juniperus chinensis</i> 'Robusta Green'	6 ft./4.5 ft.	Rugged, irregular columnar habit with tufted, bright green needles.	5–9
<i>Picea orientalis</i> 'Firefly'	6 ft./ 4 ft.	Symmetrical conical habit, with gold needles that remain dark green where shaded.	5–8
<i>Pinus parviflora</i> 'Fukuzumi'	6 ft./ 12 ft.	Wide-spreading, windswept habit with multiple leaders; twisted, blue-green needles.	5–9
<i>Sciadopitys verticillata</i> 'Picola'	30 in./15 in.	Conical dwarf umbrella pine with shiny, long, dark green needles.	6–8
<i>Taxodium distichum</i> 'Pevé Minaret'	8–10 ft./ 2–4 ft. (variable)	Narrow habit, looks like a miniature bald cypress, deciduous; responds well to pruning.	5–10
<i>Taxus cuspidata</i> 'Rezek's Gold'	24 in./ 18 in.	Upright, irregular dwarf with butter-yellow new growth that turns dark green as it matures.	4–7
<i>Thuja occidentalis</i> 'Brobeck's Tower'	7 ft./2 ft.	Upright, vertical form with twisted fans of deep green foliage; good for a tight corner or as a vertical accent.	2–7



Top, far left: *Abies balsamea* 'Piccolo'. Bottom, far left: *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Little Champion'. Left: *Picea orientalis* 'Firefly'. Above: *Sciadopitys verticillata* 'Picola'.