

# Conifers in the Winter Garden

by Cori Bacher

*Picea glauca* 'Pendula'



By winter many of the plants in our gardens have gone to sleep. Thus, after having been less visible during the preceding seasons, evergreen trees and shrubs now emerge to carry the garden through to spring. While broad-leaved evergreens provide structure and relief from the barrenness of winter, their appearance can be affected by the weather. Therefore at this time of year it is the conifers, invigorated by the cold and glowing with health, which truly shine. Furthermore, a number of conifers change color in the winter, offering brighter or deeper colors than in warmer seasons. For ideas about great conifers in the winter garden I sought out avid conifer growers and experts, and asked for their top five selections.

Jock Demme is the very knowledgeable horticultural sales representative at Iseli Nursery, a wholesale grower of rare and unusual conifers and Japanese maples located in Boring, Oregon. Plants with the distinctive triangular Iseli Nursery tag are held in high esteem in gardens in the Pacific Northwest and throughout North America. For more information visit their excellent website at [www.iselinursery.com](http://www.iselinursery.com).

Jock's first selection is the spectacular *Pinus contorta* 'Chief Joseph' with its dramatic color change from green to a bright lemon-yellow in the fall. He favors *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Mushroom' for its shift from green to plum-purple. *Chamaecyparis thyoides* 'Heatherbun' also deepens to a soft plum color. Next is blue spruce, *Picea pungens*, of which Iseli offers many cultivars. The blue of these plants glows in the subdued light of winter, offering a wonderful foil to our gray skies. Serbian spruce, *Picea omorika* 'de Ruyter', rates for its two-tone coloration of blue and green needles on the same, very sculptural, plant. Finally, he chose *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Limeglow' with its vivid yellow to gold coloration that deepens to shades of purple in the winter.

I also asked Jock about his favorite conifers in general and he gave me this list: *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Thowell', *Pinus strobus* 'Niagara Falls', *Sciadopitys verticillata* 'Joe Kozey', *Cephalotaxus harringtonia* 'Fastigiata', and *Picea glauca* 'Pendula'. These are five very different plants, and at least one would look great in any garden.

Conifer cognoscenti have long known about the garden created by Jerry Fortner and Anthony Guisa. Theirs is the rare

collector's garden that achieves a lyrical, cohesive feel. When I asked for their top five choices I got the following reply from Jerry:

"Let's see, brilliant silver blue billowing across the ground; turning plum purple in the winter; turning schoolbus yellow in the winter; glowing like a tall and twisty torch before losing its needles; waterfall of weeping rust before losing its needles; bushy foxtail bristles; permanently flocked Christmas tree; golden yellow and spreading or towering; grayblue needle piercing the sky; multicolored blue and yellow or green and creamy; cones like tiny red Christmas ornaments or cones of blue or purple; spring bloom of new growth that is flamingo pink or copper or gold or brass; delicate new foliage just too soft to be real; perfectly round green or blue or silver mounds; I could go on and on and on and on and she wants me to choose just five favorites!"

Saturday afternoon, thinking about this selection, Mirror Pond in hand as I wandered the yard before settling into a chair facing the small back conifer bed, I had the brilliant idea I'd just select five from this grouping but gave up when I couldn't whittle the number down.

I was about to throw in the hoe until my Sunday morning front yardwalk when I realized: OK, I can do five faves from this small bed. And here they are:

## 1. *Picea pungens* var. *glauca* 'Fastigiata'

Tall, narrow, gorgeous gray blue against the winter sky. Elegant. Always on my short list of trees I wouldn't do without!

## 2. *Picea pungens* 'Procumbens'

Baby blue, slowly spreading and mounding around a pink spike of lepidolite (I think it is).

## 3. *Picea omorika* 'Pendula'

Gracefully wandering & weeping tree of blue gray needles with striking silver upcurved undersides.

## 4. *Larix kaempferi* 'Paper Lanterns'

Soaring narrow tower of oh-so-soft green that turns into a golden torch before the needles drop to be replaced by even softer ones in the spring.

## 5. *Pinus contorta* 'Taylor's Sunburst'

Shocking brilliant yellow new growth that lingers into summer. Makes me regret my directive to buy specimens as small as I can possibly stand.



Just five of a couple hundred, each of which holds its own in a TOP 5 context, all of which are about to come into their own as we approach winter and all that other stuff gets out of the way for a while.”

Whew! You can take a video tour of Jerry and Anthony’s garden at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qegcTY1FydM&index=19&list=UUgYJWaHwLMmyvZzKH5yRocw>.

They might open their garden to HPSO members in mid- to late winter. Check the HPSO weekly email blasts to get updates.

Finally, here are my own picks. I love ***Chamaecyparis obtusa* ‘Pygmaea Aurescens’** all year for its layered form, but in winter the outer scales turn a true bronze. A new infatuation is with ***Thuja occidentalis* ‘Jantar’**, a golden-yellow column whose color deepens to amber in the winter. ***Thuja occidentalis* ‘Zmatlik’** is the most deeply incised of the columnar *Thuja* and the raking light of winter greatly heightens its sculptural qualities. ***Abies koreana* ‘Aurea’** with its pale gold needles and their lavishly silvered undersides is another ray of sunshine. Finally, my favorite conifer, ***Thuja plicata* ‘Grune Kugel’**, doesn’t change a whit in the winter, but with its foliage so glossy and deep green, and its ball-shaped habit striking just the right balance between messy and tight, I appreciate the opportunity to enjoy and admire it every day.

In addition to enjoying the winter beauty of conifers, I think winter is also an ideal time to plant these wonderful specimens. Not only is siting them much easier with so much foliage out of the way, they also appreciate cooler temperatures and moister conditions as they get established. If the cold winds get too much, coat them with anti-desiccant, but generally you can plant them, water them and leave them be at this time of year. Newly-planted conifers provide instant gratification for the winter garden.



*Pinus strobus* ‘Niagara Falls’



*Chamaecyparis obtusa* ‘Pygmaea Aurescens’



*Juniperus horizontalis* ‘Lime Glow’



*Picea pungens* ‘Procurbens’



*Picea omorika* ‘Pendula’



*Chamaecyparis thyoides* ‘Heatherbun’



*Pinus contorta* ‘Taylor’s Sunburst’

