

CONIFER CORNER

The Ground Huggers: Prostrate Conifers

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Picea abies 'Rariflora Weeper', Norway Spruce



The days are getting shorter, the weather will soon be getting cooler, and birds will begin their long journey south. This can only mean one thing: autumn will soon be upon us. One of the great things about fall is the way the landscape begins to change. Forests and landscapes that have remained green all summer transform from one single color into various hues of reds, oranges, and yellows. The bright colors of fall are even further enhanced when contrasted among the lush green tones created by conifers.

Pinus densiflora
'Pendula', Weeping
Japanese Red Pine



Conifers, of course, can add much more than just a contrast of colors to fall landscapes; their varied shapes, sizes, and textures add variety and interest. One of the best ways to add variety to the landscape is by using an assortment of conifers with different forms. The American Conifer Society (ACS) recognizes eight different forms of conifers including globose, pendulous, narrow upright, broad upright, prostrate, spreading, irregular, and culturally altered. In this *Conifer Corner* article, we'll focus on prostrate forms of conifers available in the landscape industry.

The American Conifer Society defines the prostrate form of conifers as “ground-hugging, carpeting plants without an inclination to grow upward”. The plants lack any semblance of apical dominance and will spread and creep their way around the landscape. Prostrate forms are ideal for use in rock gardens and will effectively soften the edges of borders or cascade over walls and slopes. In some situations, they can even be used as a ground cover — they make a great substitute for grass in small landscapes, suppress weeds, and can be used to “hide” unwanted features in a yard,

like an old tree stump for example. They can also be utilized in foundation and mass plantings and can be used for erosion control. Some of the more interesting or unusual cultivars can even be used as a focal point in the landscape.

Although they're not very tall, it's obvious that low-growing conifers have a place in a variety of different settings and situations. Whether you're creating a new landscape or revamping an old one, remember to include some prostrate form conifers for an interesting view!

Tips on incorporating prostrate conifers

Prostrate forms, like other conifer forms, are relatively easy to care for, but it is important that they are properly maintained in order to thrive. To keep evergreens looking healthy, always remember the following:

- **Conifers prefer well drained soil.** During planting, position the specimen so that it is about two inches above the height that it grew in the nursery. Raised beds can be used to modify sites with poor drainage.



Spreading problem: Venusta Juniper, *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Venusta' makes a terrific creeping ground cover, but tip blight can lead to maintenance issues.

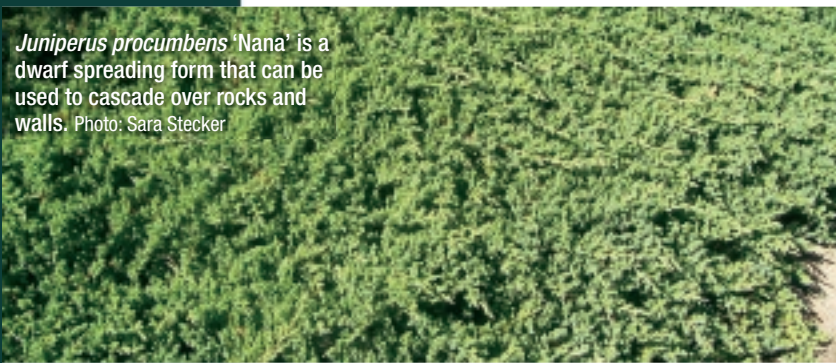


Juniperus horizontalis 'Mother Lode' adds a splash of yellow color to the landscape.

Photo: Sara Stecker



Picea abies 'Procumbens' is an interesting ground-hugging shrub and has stiff branchlets.



Juniperus procumbens 'Nana' is a dwarf spreading form that can be used to cascade over rocks and walls. Photo: Sara Stecker



A creepy duo: *Picea abies* 'Tabulaeformis' (left) and *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Wiltoni' (right) demonstrate how prostrate conifers make effective ground covers.



Picea mariana 'Ericoides' is a blue-grey spreading cultivar of black spruce.

- **Less cold-hardy plants need protection from harsh conditions.** Evergreens that are less winter-hardy should be planted in sites where they will be blocked from winter winds.
- **Leave enough space.** When positioning a plant in the landscape, remember to research how large that particular cultivar will get when it is mature. Allow enough space between other plants so that they don't crowd each other out.
- **Deciduous plants aren't the only plants that change color.** When designing a landscape, remember to consider fall and winter colors of all plants, including conifers, so that they complement each other throughout the entire year.
- **Think about more than junipers.** When most people think of low-growing, spreading conifers they immediately think of junipers. There are several outstanding prostrate junipers, but don't overlook prostrate forms of spruces, and even pines, that can add a low-growing element to a landscape design.

Juniperus horizontalis 'Mother Lode'. If color is what you're looking for, *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Mother Lode' is an excellent choice. Not only will it add a gorgeous yellow color to any setting in USDA Zone 3 or higher with full or partial sun, but it will make the landscape even more interesting when it changes to a luxurious burgundy color in the winter. Derived from *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Wiltoni', it was originally discovered in 1982 at Iseli Nursery in Boring, Oregon.

Picea abies 'Procumbens' is another interesting ground-hugging shrub. It has fine green leaves and grows in Zone 3.

Juniperus procumbens 'Nana'. The juniper has tight growth with primary juvenile-type foliage. This is a great choice for spreading in rock gardens or bonsai.

Juniperus horizontalis 'Wiltoni'. Considered to be one of the best blue carpeting junipers. This plant makes a great blue ground cover.

Picea mariana 'Ericoides'. For whatever reason, very few cultivars of black spruce are represented in the nursery trade. Known as blue nest spruce, it has a uniform shape and blue-grey color.

Blue-colored evergreens also add interest to any landscape. One interesting prostrate form is *Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Carpet', which keeps its blue foliage throughout the entire year and grows in Zone 4 or above.

Pinus sylvestris 'Hillside Creeper' provides a distinctive alternative to junipers for low-growing conifers. It was selected as a seedling by Layne Ziegenfuss in 1970 and has medium bluish-green needles in the summer that turn a golden-yellow color in the winter.

Juniperus communis 'Green Carpet' forms a thick, bright green carpet. This plant is extremely hardy (Zone 3) and is adapted to a range of soils and climatic conditions. Spreads to about 3', making it well-suited for tight spaces.

Picea pungens 'Procumbens'. This spreading form of blue spruce makes an undulating ground cover. Draped over a rock wall, it's a dramatic specimen plant.

Form classes according to the American Conifer Society (www.conifersociety.org):

1. Globose: globe-like or rounded in general outline.
2. Pendulous: upright or mounding with varying degrees of weeping branches.
3. Narrow upright: much taller than broad; includes plants referred to as fastigate, columnar, narrowly pyramidal or narrowly conical.
4. Broad upright: includes all other upright plants which do not fit into categories 1-3.
- 5. Prostrate: ground-hugging, carpeting plants without an inclination to grow upward.**
6. Spreading: wider than tall.
7. Irregular: erratic growth pattern.
8. Culturally altered: pruned or trained into formal or imaginative shapes, such as high grafts or standards.



Study in contrast: Prostrate conifers, such as this *Juniperus squamata* 'Pumila' can provide contrasting form, texture and color.



Pinus sylvestris 'Hillside Creeper' is a spreading version of Scots pine.



Juniperus communis 'Green Carpet' is a compact, spreading conifer ideal for small spaces.



Picea pungens 'Procumbens' makes a dramatic specimen plant.

Abies koreana 'Green Carpet' is a dark green spreading form of Korean fir.
Photo: Hannah Cregg

Abies koreana 'Green Carpet' is one of only a few examples of firs that fit in the prostrate category. This dwarf form of Korean fir has dark green needles. A compact plant that needs little pruning to maintain a neat, rounded form.


Microbiota decussata. This an interesting plant in many respects. Botanically, the genus *Microbiota* is monotypic; there is only one species in the genus. *Microbiota* is also noteworthy for its striking russet-red fall color. 🌿

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Microbiota decussata (front center) provides striking color in the fall..



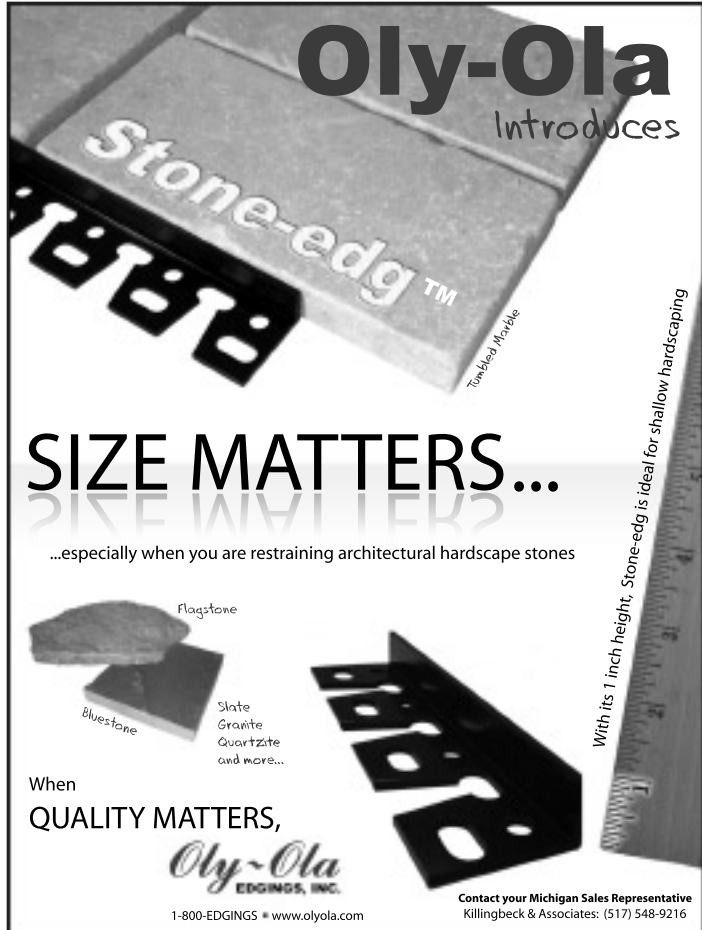
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