

CONIFER CORNER

Conifer Contortionists: Irregular Conifers

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This edition of *Conifer Corner* continues our tour of the conifer forms recognized by the American Conifer Society (ACS).



Up to this point, we have discussed stately upright trees, neat globose forms, foundation-setting spreading conifers, and ground-hugging prostrate forms. Now, as the old Monty Python line goes, “It’s time for something completely different.”

This article will focus on conifers with *irregular* forms or according to the ACS, conifers with an “erratic” growth habit. Conifers in this classification often share characteristics such as weeping branches and spreading growth habits that could be classified into the pendulous and spreading ACS forms. We consider these plants to be the “abstract art” of the landscape as they twist, turn, and contort themselves in every direction possible. These “plant Picassos” fill their own niche in the modern landscape and whether or not one is a fan, the variety that these plants contribute is immense, as no two are exactly the same.

As suggested by the name irregular, the form of these plants is anything but organized, and they are easily spotted in the landscape for this reason. These conifer contortionists seem to weep here, twist there, and then abruptly go the other way as if they have no idea which way is up. While irregular growing conifers may look like nothing else in the landscape, their origin is the same as other conifer cultivars selected for traits such as needle color or growth rate. Selection arises from propagating stable seedling mutations, bud sports, and witches brooms that are discovered to exhibit an irregular growth pattern. A lack of apical dominance in many of these plants results in an erratic multi-directional growth that often can only be tamed by staking the plant to a desired height and then leaving it to its own device.

Use of irregular conifers in the landscape presents certain challenges, the most difficult being incorporating such an unorganized form so that it ties in with the surrounding landscape without appearing out of place. However, the fact that irregular conifers are going to draw

attention wherever they are placed can be a tremendous advantage. Situations that capitalize on this advantage include using irregular growing conifers as specimen plants, in rock gardens, around water features, on hillsides, or as a conversation piece. In these situations the desired effect is often a plant that provides contrast and stands out and the form of irregular conifers definitely says “notice me”. Often these plants are sought by avid collectors who desire a plant that no one else has, or by a client who simply wants something a little unusual for their plant palette. In either case, an irregular conifer fits the bill perfectly and will almost always spark conversation. The rolling habit of *Picea abies* ‘Pendula’ is effective on hillsides and contours around rocks as it seems to flow over, enveloping the topography like a wave giving the impression of a “plant in motion”.



A plant in motion: *Picea abies* ‘Pendula’ is effectively used cascading over a hillside and upturning on the ground below like a wave crashing ashore.

Photo courtesy of Aaron Warsaw

Using irregular conifers in areas with limited plant material, such as rock gardens, is effective as the complex character of the conifer can be given free rein to develop without fear of detracting from surrounding non-vegetative surfaces. An irregular form with dynamic movement of rigid line or a graceful flowing motion can be chosen to complement or contrast depending upon the shape of rocks used.

Numerous cultivars of irregular conifers are available in the trade representing a diverse selection of conifer genera. The following is a brief list designed to scratch the surface and highlight some of the varying degrees of erratic growth exhibited by these contortionists of the conifer world.

***Larix decidua* ‘Varied Directions’**

This erratic spreading form of European Larch can stand alone in the landscape as a specimen plant where sites are wet. The highly irregular growth spreads upwards and out from the plant before gracefully arching to the ground. Needles of this deciduous conifer are medium green in summer turning to yellow in fall. The fine texture of emerging growth resembles small paint brushes ready to dot the landscape and signal the arrival of spring. One must be sure to give this plant ample room as it is a large tree putting on more than a foot of growth in a year. *Larix decidua* ‘Varied Directions’ appears frozen in time, as if reaching out to grab or pounce on whatever lies beneath. Its fine texture and adaptability to wet sites make for a good specimen plant where other conifers struggle.



As the name implies, *Larix decidua* ‘Varied Directions’ doesn’t know which end is up. Photo courtesy of Aaron Warsaw



***Picea abies* ‘Inversa’**

Another selection with that “plant in motion” appearance, Drooping Norway Spruce works well on hillsides and in rock gardens where allowed to arch and spread over whatever stands in its path creating an effective groundcover. Along with many other irregular conifers it can be staked to a desired height and used as an upright specimen. Mature specimens can reach sizes over 25 feet wide, so be sure to provide enough space.

Drooping Norway Spruce (*Picea abies* ‘Inversa’) provides ground cover as it rambles through a bed in the Harper Collection at Hidden Lake Gardens.

Photo courtesy of Aaron Warsaw

***Picea abies* ‘Cobra’**

A conversation piece if there ever was one, truly no two individuals are alike. A cross between *Picea abies* ‘Pendula’ (Weeping Norway Spruce) and *Picea abies* ‘Virgata’ (Snake Spruce) that when staked has an upright but sparsely branched leader arising from a densely branched base. A fitting name for this plant, the low branches around the base take on the character of a coiled snake with the slender leader arising from the center like a cobra ready to strike down at its prey. Place in any focal point of the landscape where it is sure to draw attention to itself and be noticed.

Picea abies ‘Cobra’ rises like a charmed snake to spark conversation as a specimen plant. For clients who desire something unique this is a winner as no two are alike.

Photo courtesy of Aaron Warsaw





Picea glauca 'Fort Ann' demonstrates the show-stopping effect of an irregular conifer as a specimen plant.

Photo courtesy of Aaron Warsaw

Picea glauca 'Fort Ann'

Fort Ann White Spruce is a conifer with a conical to pyramidal habit characterized by gnarled branches that are few in number. Another large conifer with greater than a foot of growth per year, this tree requires room in the landscape. Needles are an attractive grey-blue and upturn around the stem on both sides.



A clear blue sky highlights the twisting branches of *Pseudotsuga menziesii* 'Waggin Tails', a Douglas-fir selection with a little more pizzazz than the species. Photo courtesy of Aaron Warsaw

Pseudotsuga menziesii 'Waggin Tails'

This Douglas-fir twists and turns its way through the sky with curving branches. 'Waggin Tails' maintains a pyramidal habit and can be used to spice up sites instead of using straight Douglas-fir. 'Waggin Tails' like the species performs best in sunny locations with moist well drained soil.

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 fastigiate, columnar, narrowly pyramidal or narrowly conical.
4. Broad upright: includes all other upright plants that 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.



Pinus strobus 'Torulosa' offers a new twist on the standard Eastern White Pine.

Photo courtesy of Bert Cregg

Pinus strobus 'Torulosa'


Its twisted and contorted needles and branches give this cultivar of Eastern White Pine an unmistakable look. Despite the irregular needle and shoot growth, 'Torulosa' will still grow to be a large tree, so be sure to give this tree some room.



Funny name. Great plant. This Jack Pine cultivar looks like a plant that is trying to make an escape from the garden.

Photo courtesy of Bert Cregg

Pinus banksiana 'Uncle Fogy'

Only a handful of cultivars of Jack Pine (*Pinus banksiana*) are recognized by the ACS. What the species lacks in numbers, it makes up for in character — especially with this character. 'Uncle Fogy' could be the poster child for the 'irregular' form class. Descriptions of this plant include 'bizarrely attractive', 'wildly undulating' and 'nearly grotesque'. And, these are from people who like the plant! The unusual character of this plant even extends to its name. According to one source on the ACS database, the name Uncle Fogy is reference to 'a dirty old man' because the excessive resin on the buds looks like drool. Regardless, this is an extremely hardy (zone 2) and fascinating plant that makes a unique contribution for the landscape in need of something special. 

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