
CONIFER CORNER

Setting the
Foundation:
Spreading
Conifers

*By Robert Reese
Michigan State University
Department of Crop and Soil Sciences*

And

*Bert Cregg
Michigan State University
Department of Horticulture and Department of Forestry*



Ornamental conifers come in an incredible array of shapes, sizes and colors.

In this current series of *Conifer Corner* we are spotlighting conifers in each of the form classes recognized by the American Conifer Society (ACS) (see sidebar on next page). In this stop on our conifer tour, we're highlighting **Spreading Conifers**. The ACS defines spreading conifers as "wider than tall and often two to three times wider than tall." Spreading conifers may be found in many conifer types including junipers, yews, pines and spruces.

Spreading conifers may be thought of as the "offensive line in the conifer world". Like prostrate or ground-hugging conifers, spreading conifers lack strong apical dominance, resulting in a wide rather than a tall plant. However, spreading conifers grow taller than prostrate conifers and therefore make good choices as foundation plants, forming an essential building block to landscape designs. Landscape design is the 'art' of enhancing outdoor space structures and plants for practical and aesthetic purposes. With the use of spreading conifers, one can have a successful landscape design that will be both eye pleasing and functional.

Good landscape design follows a combination of seven principles: unity, balance, proportion, focalization or emphasis, sequence or transition, rhythm, and repetition. Spreading conifers make great landscaping plants because they can contribute to all of these principles. Spreading conifers can be used as focal points around the base of a house. They can be used to define the boundaries of a property or even make a maze by using a hedge. But most importantly, spreading conifers can be used to accent or bring contrast to the other plants in the landscape.

While the thought of spreading conifers often conjures up images of yews and junipers, there are many more possibilities. As we'll discuss below, there are spreading cultivars of spruces, pines, and even firs and deciduous conifers that can add character to the landscape. Discussing spreading conifers also points out the challenges in categorizing conifer growth forms. While some cultivars start out with a spreading habit, many other cultivars that are recognized as globose or even broad upright often become spreading age. This is one of the great aspects of working with conifers; the character of the plants is continually changing with time.



Juniperus squamata 'Blue Star' proves that spreading conifers can be more than just foundation plants.



Picea abies 'Pumila' can serve as a great foundation plant.



Picea abies 'Nidiformis' makes for an excellent plant that can be used around the foundation of a house.



Spread a little sunshine. *Juniperus chinensis* 'Saybrook Gold' offers a bright yellow take on the spreading juniper.

Juniperus squamata 'Blue Star'. This plant combines the spreading form with striking blue color. This dwarf form has short branches that form a star-like appearance. Considered by some nurseries to be the best dwarf juniper in production.

Picea abies 'Pumila' is a dwarf conifer that grows 1-6" per year, is a wide spreading conifer and has dark green needles. 'Pumila' tends to mound in the center like a cone as it ages. When young, it will look a bit globose, but will spread out with age.

Picea abies 'Nidiformis' is often called Bird's Nest Spruce. This cultivar originated from a witches' broom and can even grow witches' brooms. It is a slow growing dwarf at 1-6" per year. It is a medium green plant that has a nice flat top. The branches will radiate from the center and the plant has tight compact growth. It will make for an excellent plant that can be used around the foundation of a house.

Juniperus chinensis 'Saybrook Gold' is an intermediate growing conifer (<1' per year) with intense yellow foliage. This juniper is open-growing, exposing woody brown branches. Originated from Girard Nursery in Geneva, Ohio.

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.

Abies koreana 'Green Carpet' is a dwarf spreading form of Korean fir that adds a nice texture and bright green foliage to the landscape.

Abies nordmanniana 'Golden Spreader'. Looking for something different in a spreader? This cultivar or Nordmann fir offers an alternative to junipers for a yellow spreading form. Site selection is important. This plant may appear washed out if planted in full sun. Look for a site with good drainage and partial shade.

Picea mariana 'Ericoides'. Although black spruce (*Picea mariana*) has a transcontinental range from eastern Canada and the northern U.S. to Alaska, there are very few cultivars of this species in the trade. The ACS lists 16 cultivars of *P. mariana*, compared to well over 200 for *P. abies*. This slow-growing dwarf form is commonly known as blue-nest spruce. This blue-green form has a soft texture and makes an attractive accent or border plant.

Pinus pumila 'Glauca' appears in many catalogs as *Pinus pumila* 'Dwarf Blue', although the ACS database lists *P. pumila* 'Glauca' as the legitimate name. Regardless of what you call it, this dwarf slow-growing spreader makes an outstanding landscape plant. In the spring, bright-red pollen buds add a striking element of contrast.

Tsuga canadensis 'Brookline'. Need a spreading conifer for a shady spot? This cultivar of eastern hemlock is a slow-growing spreader that can handle low light conditions.



Shady character. *Tsuga canadensis* 'Brookline' brings the spreading form to shady spots.



More than yews and junipers. *Abies koreana* 'Green Carpet' is a fir in the spreading form class.



Abies nordmanniana 'Golden Spreader' is a yellow form of Korean fir that does best with partial shade.



Rare bird. Blue nest spruce (*Picea mariana* 'Ericoides') is one of the few black spruce cultivars in the nursery trade.




Spreading conifers such as this *Pinus pumila* 'Glauca' can provide contrasting form, texture and color.



Taxodium distichum 'Secret' can provide varying effects depending on how it is grafted on a standard.

Taxodium distichum 'Secret'. Even deciduous conifers can get into the spreading act.

Taxodium distichum 'Secret' is often grafted high on a standard. When grafted low it becomes mounding or spreading. According to the ACS database the original plant was discovered at the Secret Arboretum in Wooster, OH in the 1990s. The original plant was lost in 2000, but the plant is now well established in the trade. 

About the authors:

Robert Reese is a recent graduate of Michigan State University in Agri-business Management. His hometown is Lansing, Michigan and his favorite conifer is Green Arrow Nootka Falsecypress (Chamaecyparis nootkatensis 'Green Arrow').

Dr. Bert Cregg is an Associate Professor in the Departments of Horticulture and Forestry at MSU. He conducts research and extension programs on management and physiology of trees in landscape, nursery, and Christmas tree systems.

All photos used in this article are used by permission of Bert Cregg and may not be reused in any way without express written permission.



Small Fruit Plants

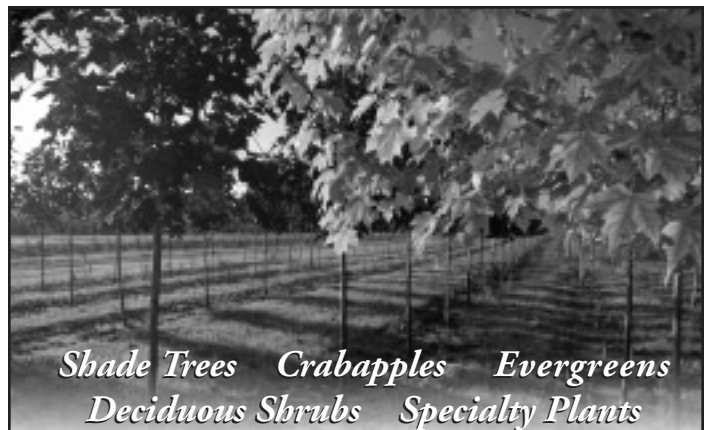
Kiwi, Blueberries, Raspberries, Gooseberries, Lingonberries, Currants, Hollyberry Plants, Blackberries, and interesting native plants.

Plants are grown & shipped from Michigan ready to grow.

Contact us for a
FREE CATALOG
including prices.

Hartmann's Plant Company

P.O. Box 100
Lacota, MI 49063-0100
p (269) 253-4281 • f (269) 253-4457
E-mail: info@hartmannsplantcompany.com



Quality Plants - Quality Service - For Over Eighty Years

Delivery Service Available

1020 Van Wormer Rd., Saginaw, MI 48609
Phone 989-781-1650, Fax 989-781-0177
Visit us at www.klucknursery.com