

# Dwarf Conifers

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## Introduction

Of all the evergreens available to us here in Virginia, perhaps the least understood group are the conifers. We often think of conifers as those large, majestic specimens we see in photographs of the forests of our northern states and Canada. And, indeed, most conifers are particularly happy in the colder climates, with their southernmost zone being Zone 7. Fortunately, we here in central Virginia with our Zone 6b and Zone 7 conditions, can experiment with a number of conifers. Equally fortunate, there are now available a number of cultivars whose size permits the incorporation of conifers into even the smallest of gardens.

We will begin by reviewing some of the less well known conifers such as the true cedars, the Japanese cedar, the plum yew, and Russian arborvitae (*Microbiota*). Later, we'll consider some select pines and spruces, the false cypress, and discuss the plight of the Canadian hemlock. The cultivars that will be described are usually readily available through Virginia's garden centers or wholesale nurseries. There are many other cultivars, of course, which may be available through mail order, but which have not been acclimated to Virginia. We will not be discussing the many junipers and arborvitae that grow so well here, and are real workhorses in our gardens. Nor will we discuss yews, which are not true conifers but are often grouped with them because of the similar needles.

What is a conifer? Obviously, as the name denotes, conifers are woody plants whose fruit develops into a cone. Even the Eastern Red Cedar, which is really our native juniper, *Juniperus virginiana*, develops a cone - only we perceive it as a small blue berry, which is used in medicine, varnish and for flavoring gin. For a more specific definition: "Conifers are trees or shrubs that bear woody cones containing naked seeds. Junipers are included because the berry-like fruits are actually small cones with fleshy, fused scales." Most conifers are evergreen, although a few, like the Larch and the Bald-cypress, are deciduous. A "dwarf" conifer is a relative term, in that some so-called dwarfs are may be big enough to stand under. However, for our purposes here, a dwarf means that the cultivar will be much smaller than the species, generally no more than 10-15'. In most cases, dwarf conifers are very slow growing\*, and so remain quite manageable for a long time.

## True Cedars

Of the "true" cedars, the three that seem to do better in our region are the Atlas Cedar, *Cedrus atlantica*, and the Deodar Cedar, *Cedrus deodara*, (zones 6/7-8/9) and the Lebanon Cedar, *Cedrus libani* (zones 5-7).

- Although the most popular of the Atlas cedars is the blue form 'Glauca', it can reach 60'+ and would be too big for most of our gardens. A beautiful specimen to try, however, in the right location is the weeping form, 'Glauca Pendula', which can be trained across a wall, its blue-needled branches cascading like water. With careful training, pruning and staking, it's definitely a conversation piece. It tends to grow quickly while young, then slows down. It prefers a well-drained, moist deep, loamy soil; sun or partial shade; and needs shelter from strong winds. A good example is at the Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden in Richmond.
- The Deodar cedar reaches 30-70' high at maturity, and there are no dwarf forms readily available at this time. You can see them around Richmond on some of the larger properties, such as Maymont. If you have the space, it's a beauty with its silvery blue or gray green 1.5" needles and graceful pendulous branching.
- Of the Lebanon cedars, 'Nana' is a graceful dwarf form with a mature height of about 10'. It grows slowly, and demands a sunny, dry and pollution-free location, and good deep, well-drained loam.



## Japanese Cedar

While the above true cedars fall in the Pinaceae (Pine) family, the Japanese Cedar, *Cryptomeria japonica*, is not a cedar at all, falling into the Taxodiaceae family. It is a lovely, graceful, pyramidal tree, with a medium growth rate, zones 5/6-8.

- 'Yoshino' will reach 30-40' and serves well for screening as well as for a specimen.
- A smaller cultivar is 'Elegans', 9-15' tall, rather bushy, with soft, feathery 1/2" to 1' needles, green in the summer turning brownish red in winter.

*Cryptomeria* is easy to grow, preferring a sunny, protected location, but will tolerate light shade, and a rich, deep permeable acid soil with abundant moisture.

## Japanese Plum Yew

The Japanese Plum Yew, *Cephalotaxus harringtonia*, is said to show amazing heat tolerance, with zones given as 5/6 to 9. It grows slowly, requires most well-drained soil, but once established will tolerate drought. It prefers shade, though will tolerate full sun, and is considered deer-proof. Dirr\* considers it to be a good replacement for yews in the south. The needles are a lustrous dark green throughout the year, unless sited in sunny, windswept locations. There are two cultivars to consider:



- Duke Gardens' typically reaches 2-3 '(5') in height and spreads to 3-4 (5') in width.
- 'Fastigiata' is a columnar form reaching 10' in height and 6-8' in width. The 2' long needles are black-green and arranged in a bottlebrush-like fashion, providing an unusual textural quality

## Russian Arborvitae/Siberian Cypress

Russian arborvitae or Siberian cypress (*Microbiota decussata*, of the Cupressaceae - cypress- family) is a spreading evergreen ground cover that may do well in our cooler outlying areas. It grows about 12" high, spreads "indefinitely", and the foliage is soft-textured and arching, bright green in summer and bronzy purple in winter. Some shade is acceptable, and well-drained moist soil seems to be a must. It suffers in serious heat and in heavy soils. I've seen this growing in a friend's partly shaded yard in Williamsburg, and it's gorgeous, worth trying in the right location.

## Pines

Some interesting pines to consider include the Umbrella pine, the Lacebark pine, the Japanese Red Pine.

- The Umbrella pine, although a member of the Pinaceae family, is really *Sciadopitys verticillata*. Its ultimate mature size may be 20-30' by 15-20', although it is very slow growing. It should be used a specimen or accent, as it has a very unusual texture due to the way the needles radiate around the stem creating the umbrella effect. Considered a zone 5-7 plant, in zone 7 it prefers some light pine shade or late afternoon shade and rich, moist, acid soil and some protection from wind.



- The Lacebark pine, *Pinus bungeana*, is often cited for its handsome bark, which exfoliates in patches, creating the "lace" effect. As such it is best used as an accent plant. Also slow growing, the mature size of the species may be 30-50', but there is a 'Compacta' cultivar which grows more compact and uniform, and even more slowly than the species. It prefers well-drained soils and sun.
- The Japanese Red Pine, *Pinus densiflora* (right), is also best reserved for use as a specimen, as it too has an interesting bark, in this case orange to orange-red when young, peeling off in thin scales, and grayish at the base in old age. 'Umbraculifera' and 'Tanyosho' are semi-dwarf cultivars, reaching perhaps 10' or more. Both have rich green needles and prefer a sunny, well-drained slightly acid soil.

## Spruces

Some spruces to consider are the Norway spruce and the white spruce. Both prefer full sun, but will tolerate light shade. And they both prefer a well-drained moist soil, and transplant readily because of the shallow root system.

- A dwarf cultivar of Norway spruce, *Picea abies* 'Little Gem' (left), is considered very dwarf, tight growing with short needles, with a flat bun shape.
- A white spruce dwarf cultivar to try is *Picea glauca* 'Jean's Dilly'. It is compact, conical, slow growing, with small thin needles, and the needles at the end of the shoots are twisted.



## Falsecypress

The Falsecypress group offers a number of interesting cultivars suitable for the home garden. As a group they tend to span zones 4-8, and do best in full sun in rich, moist, well-drained soil. They do particularly well in cooler, moister microclimates where they can be protected from drying winds.

- The Hinoki cypress or Falsecypress, *Chamaecyparis obtusa*, has three slow growing dwarf cultivars worth considering. The first two, 'Gracillis' and 'Nana Gracillis', reach a mature height of about 15' and 6' respectively. Both have rich deep green foliage and a conical shape. The third, 'Tetragona Aurea', matures at about 15' and has golden-yellow fern-like foliage that turns green in the interior of the plant.
- The Japanese Falsecypress, *Chamaecyparis pisifera*, also has a few dwarf cultivars that can make interesting accents for your garden. 'Boulevard' is a popular cultivar because of its silvery blue-green summer foliage which turns grayish blue in winter. It reaches a height of 10-15' and is rather narrow-pyramidal. The 'Filifera' cultivars as a group have drooping threadlike foliage, very

fine-textured and arresting. 'Filifera Golden Mop' is a dwarf with the brightest gold of the golden thread leaf cultivars.

### The Plight of the Canadian Hemlock

And now, about the plight of the Canadian hemlock, *Tsuga canadensis* (*right*), zones 3-7. Most of us are familiar with the beautiful form and fine-textured foliage and small cones of the hemlock. Unfortunately, in our area, and north and east, the hemlock is particularly susceptible to the woolly adelgid pest. If, in spite of this warning of you wish to try some of the smaller cultivars, consider 'Pendula', a weeping form that reaches about 10' height, and 'Bennett', a low-spreading, fan-like and mounding form with short light green needles. Although the best growth is achieved in full sun, they will withstand even full shade. They demand good drainage, cool acid soils and adequate moisture, and will languish in too much heat.



### In Closing

To best select which cultivars will suit your preferences and property, visits to Lewis Ginter Botanical Garden, to the National Arboretum in DC, or to some nurseries will prove quite helpful. Two books that can be helpful also are *Conifers*, by van Gelderen & van Hoey Smith, and *A Garden of Conifers* by Robert A. Orlitzky.

Cultural requirements based on **Manual of Woody Landscape Plants**, by Michael Dirr, revised 1998