

CONIFER CORNER

Dependable Dwarfs

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In the last edition of Conifer Corner (*The Michigan Landscape*, June 2007), I began discussing plants in each of the size classes of conifers recognized by the American Conifer Society (ACS) with a discussion of the miniature conifers. In this article, we turn our attention to the next size class recognized by the ACS, dwarf conifers.

Pinus pumila 'Glauca' is a slow growing, bushy form of Japanese stone pine with striking blue-green needles.





This dwarf eastern white pine at the Morton arboretum is over 20 feet tall and shows the dramatic character of mature dwarf conifers.



Bird's nest spruce (*Picea abies* 'Nidiformis') is a reliable performer and an alternative to other foundation plants.

Curious yellow. This *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana Lutea' is a dramatic specimen plant.
Photo: Hannah Cregg



Based on the ACS classification, dwarf conifers grow one to six inches per year and reach one to six feet by age ten. Their slow growth rate combined with a variety of growth habits and colors make dwarf conifers a great choice for a wide range of landscape uses. Dwarf conifers, like the miniature conifers we discussed in the June issue, are outstanding accent or specimen plants that add unique character to the landscape. Dwarf conifers can be especially effective in combination with perennials or ornamental grasses. They are also great additions to rock gardens or other specialty gardens.

Aging gracefully

Dwarf conifers grow slowly, but they do grow. Many dwarf conifers can reach 12 or 15 feet after thirty or forty years in the landscape. As they grow, dwarf conifers often take on a unique character that is difficult to duplicate. At the Harper Collection of Dwarf and Unusual Conifers at Hidden Lake Gardens in Tipton, Michigan, many of the specimens are 30-plus years old and are taking on distinctive personalities. In addition to the Harper Collection, conifer connoisseurs can see dwarf conifers with character born of age at the Morton Arboretum in Lisle, Illinois and in the Gotelli Collection of Dwarf and Slow-growing Conifers at the United States National Arboretum in Washington, D.C.

Alternatives for yews and junipers

Dwarf conifers can also provide an interesting and appealing alternative for yews and junipers as foundation plants. While the term 'dwarf conifers' usually conjures up an image of cone-shaped mini-Christmas trees, many dwarf conifers have irregular or spreading growth habits and can be used as a substitute for yew or juniper hedges.

When thinking of dwarf conifers as specimen, foundation or accent plants, here are some conifers to consider:

Picea abies 'Nidiformis'

Irregular, spreading spruce with dense, horizontal layers of branches, much wider than tall. Light green color. Zone 2, grows 3-6" per year. Bird's nest spruce is a prime example of a dwarf conifer that can be used as a foundation plant. Conifer expert Chub Harper notes: "This is an iron-clad plant. We used a 'Nidiformis' to replace my neighbor's raunchy juniper."

Chamaecyparis obtusa 'Nana Lutea'

A dwarf form of Hinoki Falsecypress with bright yellow foliage. The yellow color is a blend of golden yellow foliage and white foliage, the white often being a band interior to the golden yellow. If the plant is put into the shade the golden yellow foliage tends toward lime-green. Grows at about the same rate as its green counterpart, *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana Gracilis', at about 4" to 6" per year.

Abies koreana 'Prostrata'

A reliable plant. Specimen at Hidden Lake Gardens is 35 years old. Needles are blue on the underside. Like most Korean firs, expect lots of colorful cones.

Picea omorika 'Nana'

Serbian spruces are always a great choice for those suffering from 'blue spruce burnout'. Serbian's can't match *Picea pungens* for color, but they are adaptable to a wide range of sites and have fewer pest problems than their blue-blood cousins. More upright than spreading.

Picea pungens 'Montgomery'

For those that still need a blue spruce fix and are short on space, here's your plant. Globe-shaped when young, Montgomery is often grafted high on a standard for the 'lollipop-on-a-stick' effect. Becomes broadly pyramidal with age. Bright blue color is a real show-stopper. Chub notes: "This one's going to take over the world."



Compact Dwarf Korean fir (*Abies koreana* 'Compact Dwarf') has a broad, compact growth habit. Its short needles add texture to the landscape.



Tried and true. *Picea abies* 'Parviformis' (left) and *P. pungens* 'Montgomery' (right) have held up well over the years in the Harper Collection at Hidden Lake Gardens.



Serbian spruces are reliable plants and this dwarf form (*P. omorika* 'Nana') is no exception.



Not just baby Christmas trees... Dwarf conifers come in a variety of forms like this Pygmy spruce (*Picea abies* 'Pygmaea') near the entrance to the Harper Conifer Collection.



Thuja plicata 'Grune Kugel' has a rounded form that holds up better to snow than some globe conifers. Photo: Dax Herbst.

'Sanders Blue' white spruce (*Picea glauca* 'Sander's Blue') does a blue twist on the usual dwarf Alberta spruce.



Picea abies 'Pygmaea'

Irregular and often variable in form. Usually listed as globose, this Norway spruce can be somewhat conical or even spreading. Bright green color.

Thuja plicata 'Grune Kugel'

This cultivar of western redcedar may make a good alternative to Golden Globe arborvitae. A dwarf, globose selection with dark green shiny foliage. The tips have a very nice bronze to purple tint in the winter months in Zone 5. Appears to resist heavy snow loads and maintains an erect upright form without damage.

Picea glauca 'Sander's Blue'

The variation on Dwarf Alberta spruce (*Picea glauca* 'Conica') is a real eye-catcher. Tight, upright conical plant forms a mosaic of blue and green. It usually starts out very blue when young and juvenile and starts turning green as it gets older. On older plants it produces a nice tapestry effect between the blue and green needles. A classic case of photos not doing a plant justice. 🌿

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See me... Feel me... (with apologies to *The Who*). According to Chub Harper, everyone that sees this 'Green Globe' alpine fir (*Abies lasiocarpa* 'Green Globe') has to touch it.

Chub's Choices

Chub Harper lists his 'top five' favorite plants in each of the ACS conifer size classes.

DWARF CONIFERS — Growth per year: one to six inches.
Size at ten years: one to six feet.

1. *Abies lasiocarpa* 'Green Globe' Dwarf Rocky Mountain fir
2. *Picea abies* 'Nidiformis' Bird's Nest Norway spruce
3. *Picea glauca* 'Conica' Dwarf Alberta spruce
4. *Picea omorika* 'Nana' Dwarf Serbian spruce
5. *Picea pungens* 'Montgomery' Montgomery Colorado spruce



Dwarf conifers, such as 'Sander's Blue' white spruce (left) and 'Rainbow's End' white spruce (right), are great accent plants.

Ornamental conifer size classes recognized by the American Conifer Society

| Category | Growth per year ¹ | Approx. size at 10 years ² |
|--------------|------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Miniature | < 1" | < 1' |
| Dwarf | 1" to 6" | 1' to 6' |
| Intermediate | 6" to 12" | >6' to 15' |
| Large | >12" | >15' |

¹Size may vary due to cultural, climatic and geographical region

²Refers to growth in any direction

Source: American Conifer Society (www.conifersociety.org)