

As housing lot sizes are getting smaller, gardeners are becoming acquainted with slow-growing dwarf conifers. Unlike their giant friends, dwarf conifers do not outgrow their spaces and become an overbearing pest. It's not a surprise that dwarf conifers are becoming more popular. They add shape, texture, form and color to the small garden and grow very slowly, requiring little to absolutely no pruning to keep them in proportion to the allotted space.

You can now choose a dwarf conifer based on its color and form. Select from deep golds, blue and silver tones, a multitude of green shades and variegated colors to make your garden very interesting over all seasons. They come in all kinds of shapes and forms whether it be prostrate, tall and columnar, pendulous, mounding, or pyramidal. Dwarf conifers contribute year-round good looks to your garden. An added bonus provided by these dwarfs is winter cover and protection for our feathered friends. Plus, come spring and summer, dwarf conifers grow well with flowering shrubs, annuals and perennials.

There are dwarf conifers currently on the market for almost every growing zone, but we're extremely lucky here in the Northeast zones 4-7 as we have the largest variety of these gems from which to choose.

Dwarf conifers can vary greatly in their growth rate and eventual size. Most often, the term "dwarf" applies to the rate of growth. It can also refer to the mature size of the plant.

The American Conifer Society created a definition of conifers by establishing four categories of sizes—Miniature, Dwarf, Intermediate and Large to assist in designing gardens. The categories are based on the average rate of growth over a ten year period.

Plants in the miniature category grow close to one inch per year with an approximate ten year size of less than one foot. Examples: *Picea abies* 'Pumila' (Dwarf Norway Spruce), *Pinus strobus* 'Sea Urchin' (Dwarf White Pine).

True dwarfs grow one to six inches yearly with a ten year size of about one to five feet. Examples: *Picea glauca* 'Pixie' (Dwarf Pixie White Spruce). *Tsuga Canadensis* 'Betty Rose' (Betty Rose Canadian Hemlock).

Intermediate conifers grow six to twelve inches per year and their ten year size is around five to ten feet. Examples: *Pinus cembra* (Swiss Stone Pine), *Pinus strobus* 'Bergmanii' (Bergman's Japanese White Pine).

The large category grows very fast, more than twelve inches per year becoming over ten feet in the ten year measurement period. Examples: *Pinus bungeana* (Lacebark Pine), *Abies procera* (Noble Fir).

Note that the ten year growth refers to growth in any direction, not just height. Once established, there may be some variance of growth due to soil conditions, climate, and site. When purchasing the right conifer for my garden, I check tags to look for this growth information. Unfortunately, not all nurseries and growers provide data about annual growth on their plant tags which means a little more research is needed to find the right plant. It's also important to remember that conifers will continue to grow at the stated rate all their life. They don't simply stop growing at the ten-year point.

Regardless of how much space you have, dwarf conifers can easily fit into your garden design. To make the best of their versatility, consider growing some in patio containers, like bonsai, or make groupings that combine groundcover conifers with mounding, oval, and conical shaped dwarfs. Some dwarf conifers grow very upright and will add vertical lines to your garden. Also consider the variety of colors available. Dwarf conifers can also be used as erosion control. Plant them on steep sloping banks, eliminating the need for mowing. You will have virtually no maintenance while enjoying the attractive shapes and colors.

Containers:

If using dwarf conifers in containers, be sure to use well-drained soil as they cannot handle consistently damp conditions. Almost any shape of container can be interesting and pleasing. They can be effectively positioned on an outdoor patio or placed on a hardscape feature. *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Wissel's Saguaro' is a great choice for a container. It will add height and color (blue-green branching). Since it grows upright and narrow, it will fit into a small spot on your deck. It will provide a structural look to a container and combines well with low growing flowering annuals or perennials.

Groups:

Another great way to use dwarf conifers is to cluster different shapes, colors and textures in a grouping. *Picea glauca* 'Daisy's White' is a cone-shaped dwarf conifer that produces wonderful white new growth in the spring. It looks superb grouped with *Picea abies* 'Pusch' which was named Collector's Conifer of the Year in 2008. 'Pusch' is a dwarf, globose variety of Norway Spruce. It is spreading, never developing a terminal leader. The foliage is dark green but in early spring, this plant produces a stunning display of bright red cones on numerous terminal branches. Add a third conifer to the cluster by introducing another color—golden yellow, *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana Lutea' has an irregular growth, globose form. These conifers will serve as focal points and will harmonize with annuals and perennials such as hostas, daylilies and creeping sedums.

Groundcover:

Spreading varieties of dwarf conifers make for excellent groundcovers. One of my favorites is *Juniperus horizontalis* 'Mother Lode'. 'Mother Lode' has brilliant gold foliage that changes to a golden bronze in winter. Unlike some other spreading junipers, 'Mother Lode' is soft and feathery and will not attack you with sharp needles. It will spread widely and lay very close to the ground.

Vertical lines:

Dwarf conifers can add height without taking up a lot of space. Ones that grow upright, straight, but not overly wide will serve as a focal point or add depth to a small bed. Good candidates for this type of bed design include *Juniperus* 'Gold Cone' and *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Blue Surprise'. Both grow very narrow, reaching only 2 to 3 feet wide in 10 years.

Planting and care of conifers:

The best time to plant conifers in our region is October through April. Plant only up to the root flare, which is exactly what it sounds like, where the roots begin to flare and branch out. Planting too deep many times will kill the tree. Also, make sure to remove any burlap or wrapping around the root ball. Newly planted conifers will need to be watered well, especially if drought conditions exist.

Most prefer full sun and slightly acidic soil. I always recommend conducting a soil test. Test kits are available at the extension office. Test results will assist you in determining whether amendments may be needed to enhance the growing environment for your selected conifers. Unless the soil is exceptionally poor, it's generally not necessary to fertilize.

Conifers aren't extremely fussy about the kind of soil, but they absolutely hate wet feet. Good drainage is of essence for them to stay healthy.

Dwarf conifers really do fit into almost any landscape. They're perfect for the small garden, provide diversity in color and form and are beautiful throughout all seasons. And fortunately for us home gardeners, the selection of dwarf conifers to choose from has greatly increased in the past decade!

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