

## Miniature and Dwarf Conifers

When most people think of conifers, they envision towering pines or fir trees. There are, however, smaller versions that lend themselves very nicely to any landscape or garden – the miniature or dwarf conifers.

Conifers are cone-bearing trees or shrubs with needle-like or scale-like foliage. They add a lot of texture to the garden. Dwarf conifers are smaller versions, making them perfect for a suburban setting. The term "dwarf" is relative. A 20-foot-tall white pine is a dwarf compared to its 80-foot parent. The American Conifer Society has defined the following categories:

- Miniature conifers grow less than 1 inch per year to a total height of 1 foot or less in 10 to 15 years.
- Dwarf conifers grow from 1 to 6 inches annually and range from 1 to 6 feet in 10 to 15 years.
- Intermediate conifers grow 6 to 12 inches a year, reaching 6 to 15 feet tall in 10 to 15 years.
- Large conifers grow more than 12 inches per year.

Because most dwarfs will only achieve 6 feet in 10 years, they can be perfect for a small yard, condominium, Japanese or rock garden. Miniatures as well as dwarfs can also be grown in containers.

Conifers are generally thought of as growing in the typical conical shape of Christmas trees, but there are many other forms. Some are rounded, or globose, in outline. Others are pendulous, upright or mounding, with weeping branches. Still others are prostrate, growing and creeping flat on the ground.

Most dwarf conifers like sunlight. However, the Larch (*Larix*), a deciduous conifer, will do better in light shade. The soil should be well drained. For many, raised beds or berms work well. When planting, you should amend the soil with peat, perlite and/or compost. You should also be aware that some dwarf or miniature conifers may be burned or dried out by wind or sun, so location should be considered carefully.

Fertilizers should be used sparingly, as the purpose of having dwarf varieties is their small size. Adding a tablespoon of 5–10–10 into the soil at planting time is sufficient to assist a plant in establishing a good root system. Compost mulches will furnish enough nutrients to older plantings.

Watch for chlorosis, or yellowing of the leaves. This often indicates that the soil is not acidic enough. The pH range for most conifers should be 4.5 to 6.0. Add iron sulfate, available in liquid form as well as dissolvable powders, from your local nursery. Be sure to read the directions carefully when using these products.

While there are many, many varieties, listed here are some very popular miniature or dwarf conifers that can be found in the Northwest:

*Cedrus deodara* 'White Imp' (Cedar) very dwarf – only 3 feet tall and wide.

*Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana Gracilis' (Hinoki False Cypress) a slender, upright tree with nodding branch tips and green color, which grows to 4 feet.

*C. obtusa* 'Elf' (Hinoki False Cypress) very dwarf, growing only ½ inch to 1 inch yearly and emerald green in color.

*C. pisifera* 'Filifera Avera' (Sawara False Cypress) grows to 8 feet, with yellow threadlike branchlets.

*Juniperus communis* 'Gold Cone' (Juniper) very dwarf, columnar form with bright golden yellow foliage in spring and summer, growing to 2 feet.

*J. communis* 'Berkshire' (Juniper) miniature, with silvery-blue needles. Grows to 12 inches by 12 inches in 15 years.

*J. horizontalis* 'Mother Lode' (Juniper) low growing to 4 inches, spreading to 10 feet, with rich golden yellow foliage that changes to yellow-bronze tinged with plum in the winter.

*Picea abies* 'Little Gem' (Norway Spruce) forms a round mound, with dark green needles. Miniature, growing to 1 foot high and wide.

*P. glauca albertiana* 'Conica' (Dwarf Alberta Spruce) compact with conical shape, growing slowly to 6 to 8 feet tall, 4 to 5 feet wide in 35 years.

*P. g.* 'Alberta Globe' (Alberta Spruce) rounded form, miniature, growing to 10 inches tall in 10 years.

*P. orientalis* 'Mount Vernon' (Oriental Spruce) extreme dwarf mound with tiny green needles. This one grows to 8 inches by 14 inches after 10 years.

*Pinus aristata* 'Sherwood Compact' (Bristlecone Pine) comes in globe or pyramidal shapes, with needles flaked with pitch deposits. Very slow growing to 3 feet and does well in containers.

*P. mugo* 'Mitsch Mini' (Mugo Pine) symmetrical miniature with green foliage. Very slow growing to 4 feet to 8 feet high and up to twice as wide.

*P. mugo* 'Pot o'gold' (Mugo Pine) dwarf rounded mound that stays neat and compact. Emerald green summer color changes to lemon yellow in winter. Size after 10 years is 3 to 4 feet.

*Thuja occidentalis* 'Rheingold' (Arborvitae) bright golden dwarf with a mixture of scale and needle foliage. Seldom exceeds 6 feet tall.

*Tsuga canadensis* 'Cole's Prostrate' (Canadian Hemlock) low growing to 1 foot tall, and up to 3 feet wide.

*T. canadensis* 'Gentsch White' (Canadian Hemlock) dwarf globose form with white tipped foliage. Grows to 2 feet tall and 1 ½ feet wide.

## Resources

[Garden Conifers](#)

[Dwarf Conifers Explained](#)

Steven R. Lorton, *The Other Conifers*, Sunset, Volume 205, Issue 6, December 2000: pp 56-58.

Brenzel, Kathleen Norris, *Sunset Western Garden Book*, Sunset Publishing Corporation, Menlo Park, California 2001.