

### Dwarf and Miniature Conifers

Christmas focuses on the beauty of evergreens and small conifers that can add year-round interest as specimens or accents. Most suburban lots cannot accommodate many full sized conifers. As the traditional garden spaces get smaller dwarf and miniature conifers adapt very well to such resized landscapes.

What is the difference between a dwarf and a miniature conifer?

"Dwarf" and "miniature" are relative terms in the conifer world, indicating a plant that grows smaller and more slowly than the species. 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.

In general dwarf and miniature evergreens are best planted in early October. Always pick the right plant for the right site being sure to match the plant's growing conditional needs with site location. Think of dwarf conifers as anchors in mixed plantings. They change from season to season and you can find them in shades of green, blue and yellow.

Conifers are generally thought of as growing in the typical conical shape of Christmas trees, yet many other forms exist. 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 and miniature 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. Be aware that some dwarf or miniature conifers can burn or dry in windy or sunny areas, so consider its placement in your landscape carefully.

Use fertilizers sparingly, as the purpose of having a dwarf is their small size. Adding a teaspoon of 5-10-10 into the soil at planting time is sufficient to assist a plant in establishing a good root system. Compost will furnish adequate nutrients for older plantings. Watch for chlorosis, or yellowing leaves. This often indicates the soil is not acidic enough. The pH range for most conifers is 4.5 to 6.0. Add iron sulfate, available in liquid form as well as dissolvable powders, found at your local nursery. As always, be sure to read the directions carefully when using these products.

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

- *Cedrus deodara* 'White Imp' (Deodar Cedar) very dwarf – only 3 feet tall and wide.
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- *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana Gracilis' (Hinoki False Cypress) a slender, upright tree with nodding branch tips and green color, which grows to 4 feet.
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- *Juniperus communis* 'Gold Cone' (Juniper) very dwarf, columnar form with bright golden yellow foliage in spring and summer, growing to 2 feet.
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- *Cephalotaxus harringtonia* 'Duke Gardens' (Yew) is a good shade yew and tolerates drought once plants are established.
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- *Picea glauca albertiana* 'Conica' (Dwarf Alberta Spruce) compact conical shape, growing slowly to 6 to 8 feet in 35 years.
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- *Abies koreana* 'Silver Movers' and 'Green Carpet' (Korean Fir) are good dwarf specimens.
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- *Cedrus* (Cedar) does well in well-drained, slightly dry, sunny areas that are protected from the wind. *Cedrus deodara* 'Blue Snake' or 'White Imp' are attractive options.
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- *Pinus mugo* 'Pot o'Gold' (Mugo pine) dwarf rounded mound that stays neat and compact. Green in summer, changing to lemon yellow in winter. Size after 10 years is 3 to 4 feet.
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- *Thuja* (arborvitae) has a few dwarf cultivars including *Thuja occidentalis* 'Tiny Tim' and 'Tom Thumb'.

With so many to choose from, it is important to balance evergreen and deciduous woody plants with herbaceous plants for a most effective and diverse landscape.

## References

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 2007.

[Designing with Dwarf Conifers](#), Fine Gardening. Retrieved November 16, 2011.