



# Can-do conifers

As home gardening booms, these unheralded trees shine as wise, low-maintenance investments

BY KYM POKORNY

**I**N A NORTHWEST REGION surrounded by forests of Doug fir, Ponderosa pine, grand fir and hemlock, people could easily take conifers for granted. However, many gardeners recognize the versatility and minimal care that make them a staple in the landscape.

Even before COVID-19 and the explosive popularity of gardening, the conifer market was respectable, but now it's flourishing, according to Amanda Staehely of **Columbia Nursery LLC**. She co-owns the nursery with her husband Wayne in Canby, Oregon.

"This year, people chose to work in

their gardens," she said. "It is a comfortable and safe option while quarantining. I've never seen gardens look better. People want staples, and conifers are good for that."

Brent Markus, owner of **Rare Tree Nursery** and its retail branch, Conifer Kingdom — both located in Silverton, Oregon — has seen a similar tendency. It's one that he says has been coming on for the last 20 years as new introductions bring new fans to the world of conifers.

"It's exciting. We're able to compete with a lot of other new introductions, the hydrangeas and lilacs and such that have such broad appeal," Markus said. "The

conifer market is extremely strong. People have more appreciation for the versatility of conifers."

## Giving conifers their due

Some conifers are easy to fall in love with. *Pinus contorta* 'Chief Joseph', with brilliantly gilded needles in fall and winter and an interesting back story, is one. It was found by Doug Will of Sandy, Oregon, who was hunting in the Wallowa Mountains of northeastern Oregon.

The name Chief Joseph is a translation of Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekt, who was a leader in the last half of the



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**Previous page:** Bizon Nursery relies on *Picea pungens* 'Bison Blue' for good sales.

**This page:** *Pinus strobus* 'Stowe Pillar' (bottom) is a unique option to replace industry standards like *Pinus* 'Fastigiata' (top).

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BIZON NURSERY

20<sup>th</sup> century of the Wal-lam-wat-kain (Wallowa) band of Nez Perce, a Native American tribe indigenous to the Wallowa Valley. Seen in its golden glory, 'Chief Joseph' is not easily forgotten.

Sometimes, a new customer needs a nudge to fall in love, but once they learn the benefits of conifers, they see the value.

"I just had a neighbor who built a million-dollar house," Eric Bizon, owner of **Bizon Nursery** in Hubbard, Oregon, said. "I was explaining what conifers are, and he didn't know what I was talking about. When I told him the value of conifers after the flowers fade and the leaves

fall, then he got it."

Bizon sells loads of conifers for screening and hedging, but would also like to see some more unusual plants catch the public eye. White pines are a favorite, and one of the best in his opinion is *Pinus strobus* 'Stowe Pillar', found in the wild near Stowe, Vermont, which is the narrowest white pine on the market — narrower and tighter than *Pinus* 'Fastigiata'.

It holds up better under snow and creates an attractive vertical element or specimen in a constricted space. The width doesn't get any more than 3 feet on this 10-foot tall tree that's disease-resistant, hardy to USDA Hardiness Zone 3 and bypassed by deer and rabbits. 'Stowe Pillar' is always a plant people notice when they go to the nursery, according to Bizon.

Another pine deserving of love is the dwarf white pine *Pinus parviflora* 'Eiko nishiki', a native of Japan that arrived in the U.S. in the 1970s. Dave Grotz, owner of Peace of Mind Nursery Inc. in Silverton, Oregon, says this five-needle pine is the coolest of the *Pinus parviflora* species.

With multi-colored foliage of silver, green, and a little blue, 'Eiko nishiki' exhibits interesting needles that twist and curve like someone having a bad hair day. A large number of tripod cones of green and brown linger for



several years on a tree that grows to 10 feet tall and 8 to 10 feet wide in 25 years. It is cold tolerant down to Zone 5.

### Low maintenance worth the cost

The price of conifers can be a deterrent to the people who don't realize the time and labor it takes to grow them.

"People want a beautiful plant they don't have to do anything to," Bizon said. "Conifers fit the bill but the price can be off-putting. Price is a factor. People don't know what goes into it. We have some plants that are 10 years old before we sell them."

Jenni Burkhead, owner of **J Farms LLC** in Amity, Oregon, understands why conifers sell despite the cost.

"I think conifers above all are the lowest maintenance of all plants," Burkhead said. "In our landscapes, the first thing people will tell you is 'I >>>

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**Top and bottom:** *Picea mariana* 'Aureovariegata' offers some dramatic and colorful needles.

PHOTOS BY DAVE GROTZ

want low maintenance.' Well, why not fill it with conifers?"

Grotz, for one, wouldn't have a problem with that. He can easily rattle off a long list of conifers he thinks should get more attention. One of them is the variegated black spruce (*Picea mariana* 'Aureovariegata'), a choice conifer with creamy yellow variegation brushed on top of blue-green needles that grows 6 inches a year to about 30 feet tall and is hardy to Zone 3. Purple cones that ripen to red-brown are a bonus.

"Anyone who sees it falls in love with it," Grotz said. "It has a nice, uniform shape similar to a Christmas tree and the gold new growth over the blue foliage is spectacular. It's a hot plant. I don't see how you could grow it and be sorry."

At Bizon, two of the biggest sellers are the blue Colorado spruces *Picea pungens* 'Bison Blue' and 'Fastigata', but they are having issues with needle cast in high humidity. As a replacement, Bizon is growing Meyer's spruce (*Picea meyeri*), which will take high humidity with no problems.

It isn't as brilliant blue as 'The Blues', but has a strong blue cast. It is an upright, conical, Christmas-tree shaped tree that grows to 12 feet in 10 years and is hardy to Zone 6. *Picea meyeri* was found in a temple garden in China in 1908 by F.N. Meyer and sent to Arnold Arboretum in Boston.

Chris Utterback, co-owner with her husband, Tom, of Lone Elder Nursery in Canby, Oregon, wants to see *Tsuga canadensis* 'Cole's Prostrate' get more attention. While usually grown



as a ground cover, the Utterbacks chose to stake it into a specimen with branches that droop down, giving it the look of hairy Cousin Itt.

"The staked tree is a unique, fun, multi-headed weeping small tree," Utterback said. "It adds softness and texture to the garden."

'Cole's Prostrate' Canadian hemlock, found near Mount Madison, New Hampshire in 1929, is best grown in open



shade in moist, cool soil, protected from wind and hot, dry conditions. If left to grow as a traditional ground cover, — which it does admirably — this conifer gets about a foot tall and 7 feet wide in 10 years. It's noted as a Zone 4 plant.

### The bones of a garden

There's so much to recommend about conifers. They give the garden structure and year-round interest. Most can boast of disease-resistance and cold hardi-

ness. They can be focal points, background buffers, hedges, vertical elements and used in mixed borders or rock gardens.

Designers consider them part of the bones of the garden along with trees, most of which are deciduous, making conifers extra important in winter.

"Conifers are essential to the garden," Staehely said. "There's so much less maintenance if you find the right conifer for the right space. They do their work all year round because they're evergreen and have beautiful texture."

When asked for an example of a tree she thinks is undervalued, Staehely decided on a deciduous conifer, *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* 'North Light' (aka 'Northern Lights' and 'Schirrmann's Nordlicht'), a dwarf dawn redwood that likes to be the star of the garden. And why not? It has cheery variegation that changes with exposure — white in shady areas, gold in the Sun — and a cute globe-shape that makes it perfect as a focal point in a mixed bed.

In 10 years, 'North Light' reaches 2 ½ feet tall and wide and is hardy >>>

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*Pinus thunbergii* 'Kotobuki' (this page and opposite) is a great option for small scale conifers. PHOTO BY DAVE GROTZ

to Zone 5. It's also a relatively new cultivar discovered in Germany as a witch's broom around 2005, and it was selected as one of three plants in 2015 for inclusion into the American Conifer Society Collectors' Conifer of the Year Program.

When Staehely considers other conifers for focal points, *Abies koreana* 'Kohout's Icebreaker' comes quickly to mind. She loves the needles that twist and turn around the branches to show off their white undersides. It's similar in looks but not in size to *A. k.* 'Horstmann's Silberlocke', the plant that produced the witch's broom that eventually took its name from the man who discovered it.

Like *M. g.* 'North Light', it was also chosen as an ACS Collectors' Conifer of the Year. This Korean fir is such a slow grower that it can arrive at only 1 foot after 10 years, but it's been known to put on more height than that. No one will walk by this small but mighty addition to the garden.



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It was in a field at J Farms that the owners discovered *Pinus sylvestris* 'Green Penguin' — a plant that should have more fans — and introduced it in the New Variety Showcase at the 2012 Farwest Show. Burkhead says she came up with the name because of its cone-shaped form that looks like a bottom-heavy penguin. The juvenile foliage is shorter than the previous year so the branches look tufted at the end, an unusual characteristic that pulls in prospective customers.

'Green Penguin' is so cute, it can be sold in gallons, a plus for growers. There is nothing boring about this Scotch pine, which grows 3 to 5 inches a year up to about 4 feet tall and 18 inches wide in 10 years. An extremely easy-to-grow conifer, 'Green Penguin' never needs pruning and keeps its bottom-heavy conical shape. It's fine down to Zone 3.

Because you can't have too many pines, Grotz of Peace of Mind Nursery suggests *Pinus thunbergii* 'Kotobuki' as a serious contender for small spaces. At 4 feet tall and 2 feet wide at maturity, this Japanese black maple can fit just >>

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*Pinus sylvestris* 'Green Penguin' is suitable for containers.

PHOTO BY JENNI BURKHEAD



about anywhere. Discovered in Japan centuries ago, 'Kotobuki' means "congratulations" or "long life" in Japanese.

Anyone who has it can congratulate themselves on choosing a stellar plant. The needles on this upright conifer are dark green and held on branches that carry cream-colored cones, a nice contrast against the dark needles. This is one tough customer — it needs no pruning, is salt-tolerant for the coast, hardy to Zone 3 and disease-resistant.

Conifers are a no-brainer for the garden, which makes them a hit with both grower and customer. Even in the land of forests, we can appreciate all the thousands of conifers available in every size and shape. ☺

*Kym Pokorny is a garden writer with more than 20 years' experience writing for The Oregonian (Portland, Oregon) and other publications. She is currently a communications specialist with Oregon State University Extension Service. She can be reached at kym.pokorny@oregonstate.edu.*