

Virginia Gardening

with Jim May

Sponsored by the Virginia Green Industry Council

March 2007

Every landscape deserves a few of these beautiful conifers

Needled conifers are typically thought of as evergreen trees with a Christmas tree shape. However, neither of these descriptions is always true. They can range in size from prostrate plants growing only a few inches high to very large trees. Shapes include flat, groundcover types to upright pyramidal forms to weeping and contorted shapes. Foliage shapes can range from flat and short to long and pointed. Foliage colors can be from a gold variegated to all shades of green, gray-green and blue-green. And, far from being evergreen, some are deciduous and lose their needles yearly, while most others shed their needles every several years.

Needled conifers are usually planted as specimen trees or for a privacy screen or windbreak and most of them are very well suited for these purposes. The fact that most of them maintain leaves (needles) year-round makes their water needs special. While they may need moisture even in the winter, planting them in poorly drained soil is certain death for them. Plant in a raised bed if soil is excessively wet, or plant one or two inches higher than they were grown in the nursery.

Virginia has such a diverse climate with elevations ranging from sea level in the eastern part to several thousand feet in the mountains of the southwest. Be sure and check with a local nursery or the Extension office to make sure which conifers will survive in your area.

Most firs (*Abies* spp.) have a hard time with summers in Virginia. Fraser fir (*A. fraserii*) is a good example. It loves cold winters but not the hot summers. It is native to high elevations (above 3,000 ft.). If planted in the western part of the state, it should have afternoon shade, plenty of mulch and access to water. White or concolor fir (*A. concolor*) is one that will do well in cooler parts of the state.

Of the true cedars (*Cedrus* spp.), only the blue atlas cedar (*C. atlantica*) and the deodar cedar (*C. deodora*) are widely grown in Virginia. Both are handsome evergreens, perfect for specimen planting where they can grow without being crowded. They will both grow in full or part sun and should be sheltered from winter winds.

There are many falsecypress (*Chamaecyparis*) species to choose from. The Lawson falsecypress (*C. lawsoniana*) is a large (40 to 60 feet), dense, symmetrical specimen well suited for large landscapes. The Nootka falsecypress, or Alaska-cedar (*C. nootkatensis* 'Pendula') is a graceful, weeping pyramidal evergreen that makes a striking specimen and should be planted more often. This tree will soften any landscape and will benefit from afternoon shade and mulch.

The Japanese-cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica* 'Yoshino') is a billowy pyramidal tree well suited for privacy screens or windbreaks. Although it grows slower than the popular Leyland cypress (x *Cupressocyparis leylandii*), it tolerates wind and cold temperatures better and is less susceptible to disease problems.

There are literally thousands of species and cultivars of junipers (*Juniperus* spp.), from low groundcovers to large trees. The eastern red-cedar, native to Virginia, is actually a juniper (*J. virginiana*). Though it can be a beautiful landscape tree, it is considered more of a weed and pest because it is the alternate host of the cedar-apple rust, a fungal disease of apple trees. Several members of the species *J. scopulorum*, including Tolleson's juniper and the Colorado red-cedar make nice landscape specimens. Junipers tolerate dry conditions and much abuse. It has been said that if you can't grow anything else, plant a juniper.

There are several deciduous conifers, including the European larch (*Larix decidua*) and the dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*). Both of these trees exhibit beautiful fall color before dropping their leaves. Dawn redwood grows very fast. After becoming established, it can grow several feet a year.

The spruce genus (*Picea*) contains several popular species. The Norway spruce (*P. abies*) grows 80 to 100 feet and is a beautiful, graceful specimen excellent for windbreaks and privacy screens when planted on 20 foot centers. The Colorado blue spruce (*P. pungens*) is a stiff, more formal type of spruce. It is very popular due to its blue-green color. The Serbian spruce (*P. omorika*) is one of the most elegant spruces and deserves to be planted more often.

There are many different pines (*Pinus* spp.) to choose from. The most popular is the eastern white pine (*P. strobus*) because of its extremely fast growth and ease of transplanting. As with almost all conifers, it does not like wet feet and will decline quickly in poorly drained soil. Other good pines to choose from include the lacebark pine (*P. bungeana*), with its showy, exfoliating bark; the graceful Swiss stone pine (*P. cembra*); the Austrian pine (*P. nigra*); the loblolly pine (*P. taeda*) in the tidewater region and the small, irregularly shaped Japanese black pine (*P. thunbergii*).

The arborvitae genus (*Thuja*), while containing only a few species, has many cultivars that are excellent landscape specimens. Northern white-cedar (*T. occidentalis*) is probably the most popular. They are one of the few conifers that will tolerate moist soil but bagworms can be a problem.

The beautiful, graceful hemlock (*Tsuga* spp.) is unfortunately under attack by a formidable enemy, the hemlock woolly adelgid. This insect is wreaking havoc with stands of native hemlocks and alarming owners of landscape specimens. If planted in a moist, shady spot, adelgid damage can be minimized as these insects seem to prefer stressed plants.

Check with your favorite local nursery for these and other conifers. Every landscape deserves at least a couple of them.

Virginia Gardening with Jim May is brought to you by the Virginia Green Industry Council and the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services.