



Twelve Conifers to Add Year-Round Interest in the Garden Landscape by Elizabeth Petersen, Nursery Manager at Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens

In 2014, Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens was named an American Conifer Society Reference Garden. The outstanding selection of conifers showcased at the Gardens highlights some of the ways conifers can be used to add year-round interest in the home landscape. From screening plants, to foundational plantings among perennial beds, to spreading ground covers and mounding focal points, conifers offer visual interest through all seasons.

Generally, conifers require slightly acidic, well-draining soil, and the majority are very cold hardy. Some varieties will enjoy full sun and others, a shady spot. Specific plant care for each variety can be found on plant labels in your local nursery or by asking your retail nursery professional.

Here is a selection of twelve favorite conifers that home gardeners may wish to consider incorporating into their landscapes. Many of these may be seen at Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens, where you can find more information about these and other conifers at Nursery on the Plaza.

Ground Covers/Low-growing Dwarf Conifers

Juniperus horizontalis 'Mother Lode' (6"x4', prostrate) ~ You will strike it rich with this prostrate Juniper which adds bright yellow gold texture to the foreground of a perennial bed or rock garden. The burgundy undertones in the fall signal a transition to winter.

Tsuga canadensis 'Cole's Prostrate' (6"x4', weeping/prostrate) ~ Though slow-growing, this form on this Canadian Hemlock is a showstopper in the garden. Silvery blue-grey foliage drapes gracefully from gnarled branches. Perfect for a rock garden or terrace wall in a partly shady location.

Abies balsamea 'Piccolo' (2' h/w, globe-shaped) ~ Delightful dwarf Balsam Fir showcases brown buds for visual interest in spring and rich, dark green texture year-round. The multi-branched, finely-textured foliage is well-suited for a container planting or in the ground. This fir generally needs no pruning to maintain its form.

Thuja occidentalis "Rheingold" (6' h/w) ~ Fresh, bright foliage in this well-known, low-growing Arborvitae that can be shaped to your wish. Spring brings new foliage in gold tones, with color in the copper range. This easy to grow small shrub offers fine texture in a hardy and adaptable plant.

Focal Point Conifers

Chamaecyparis obtusa 'Nana Lutea' (4'x3') ~ One of the most outstanding features in the Perennial Garden at MCBG, this Hinoki Cypress provides both textural and color interest in the landscape. Branches appear spray-like in this upright dwarf conifer with bright gold new foliage topping dark green older growth. A highlight specimen for any garden.

Thuja plicata 'Whipcord' (4' h/w) ~ This Western Red Cedar boasts a mop-like growth reminiscent of Cousin Itt from "The Addams Family" fame. Brighter green foliage in summer transitions to bronze in fall, reminding us that this is indeed, a Red Cedar.

Picea abies 'Formanek' (4'x8') ~ Stake this normally prostrate Norway Spruce into a central upright form then allow its branches to cascade, and you will have a truly spectacular weeping form as the focal point in your garden. Allow room for this plant to spread into a dense carpet or allow it to drape gracefully over and around rocks placed cunningly for best effect.

Tsuga canadensis 'Moon Frost' (6' h/w) ~ Softly white new growth topping medium-green older growth make this Canadian Hemlock selection visually pop in any setting. Forming a globe when young, this plant will spread broadly with age while maintaining its relatively small size.

Screening/Hedging Conifers

Abies koreana 'Horstmann's Silberlocke' (12'x8') ~ Recurving upward, the silvery-white underside of the needles on this uncommon form of Korean Fir exhibits delightful contrast with the bluish-grey needle tops. With cones that are also two-toned, this conifer deserves a special spot in the landscape to be fully appreciated.

Picea glauca 'Pendula' (15'x4') ~ This stately Blue Spruce is another showstopper for the larger landscape able to withstand more cold than other species. Reaching upward in a tall spire, the weeping side branches create a graceful look to this beautiful specimen plant.

Cupressus macrocarpa 'Donard Gold' (15'x8') ~ This lovely selection of Monterey Cypress offers a cheery contrast screen or hedge for a darker spot in your garden. Softly textured lemon-yellow and chartreuse foliage contrast with the cinnamon-colored bark. Wonderful upright yet open form, and the lemon scent of the crushed foliage adds to the delight of this easy to grow tree.

Cedrus deodara 'Gold Cone' (25'x15') ~ For a relatively fast growing screen of conifers, plant multiples of these Gold Cone Deodar Cedars. Golden-yellow new foliage tops the blue-gray inner needles, providing a variegated look. The pyramidal form with weeping branches is visually stunning and will stand out as a highlight singly in the landscape or as a gorgeous screen.

This is but a small selection of the many coniferous offerings. These beautiful evergreen plants offer everything from subtle year-round color to a visual anchor in a key garden bed.

Information specific to the conifers listed above can be found at <http://www.iselinursery.com>. To learn more about conifers, the American Conifer Society website is an abundant resource, <http://www.conifersociety.org>. To learn more about Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens, go to <http://www.gardenbythesea.org>.