

Sleepy, Grumpy or Doc They Are Not

I've found that as my knowledge about plants has increased, my tastes have changed and I've learned to appreciate many plants with more subtle beauty. My earliest definition of a 'pretty plant' was one with flowers, the bigger the better. Later I liked plants with many little flowers. I'd sneak around my father's nursery and pick bouquets for my Barbie dolls. But now I've learned to love plants that never bloom at all. I'm talking about conifers. (OK, technically conifers do bloom, but the flower isn't something many of us would recognize as such.) Most conifers are evergreen plants that bear cones, such as pines and cedars. Most of us are familiar with many full sized conifers: the coastal redwoods of California, pine forests, and the spruce and fir that usually prefer higher elevations. Many of these full sized trees have siblings and cousins known collectively as dwarf conifers. The American Conifer Society defines a dwarf conifer as one that grows between 1" and 6" per year.

Once you see a few of these little guys, you'll find it's easy to fall in love with them. The variety of shape, size, color and texture is almost endless. And their usefulness is, too. If your hobby is garden railroads, the dwarf conifer is often the backbone of the landscape. If you have a passion for alpines and rock gardening, dwarf conifers blend in well, providing accent points and a subtle counterpoint to the often flashy flowers of other rock garden plants. If your delight is decorating a la Martha Stewart, pot up a dozen dwarf conifers in identical pots and line them up on the dining table at your next dinner party. But seriously, as today's gardens shrink, and spare time evaporates, dwarf conifers can fill the need for small, well-behaved, easily maintained plants that are colorful even if they don't bloom.

And yes, of course I have favorites! The blue star juniper (*Juniperus squamata* 'Blue Star') is such an intense silver blue that it almost looks fake. It's slow growing, naturally shaped in a squat bun. In the ground it might ultimately grow to 2-3' tall and 3-4' across. The leaves are tiny, triangular and sharp, and are packed closely on the stems.

Another favorite blue conifer is *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Boulevard' (boulevard cypress). The summer color is a soft silvery blue, but winter's cold will turn it plummy purple. An added attraction to this one is that since it's soft to the touch you can stroke it without getting prickled. It's not a true dwarf, but it tops out at about 6-8' tall, and is still considered a small conifer in the general scheme of things. Boulevard cypress grows into an upright shrub with very delicate ferny looking foliage, and can look spectacular in a container. It benefits from some afternoon shade.

Another *Chamaecyparis* with soft foliage is *C. obtusa* 'Chabo yadori', but the summer color on this one is blue-green, and winter cold will turn it bronze/purple. This plant is grown especially because it retains juvenile foliage all it's life. What does that mean? Well, there are plants out there that, during their life, grow two distinctly different types of leaves: juvenile and adult. In the case of false cypress, the juvenile leaves tend to have a point at the end, and grow in a more abstract, bushy form. The adult leaves are rounded and very

close together, and groups of leaves often grow in layered sprays. The hinoki cypress is a familiar example of the adult pattern of growth. However, in some cases (perhaps just to confuse us?) a plant will never grow the adult foliage. If it is attractive enough, as is *C. obtusa* 'Chabo-yadori', it is propagated for just that reason.

An attractive Chamaecyparis with adult foliage is *C. obtusa* 'Nana Lutea'. It has those layered sprays of leaves with the added attraction of yellow tips. All the new growth is bright yellow with a touch of white, and quite distinctive set against the background of the rich green older foliage. It needs light shade here in Gilroy.

The spruce family is another with dwarf members. One of the most familiar is *Picea glauca* 'Conica' or dwarf Alberta spruce, often sold as a tiny living Christmas tree. The short, sharp needles are medium green in color, and tightly clothe the stems. While it is very attractive in containers, if you have the perfect spot and some patience, it comes into its own when planted in the ground. I've seen some thirty years old; less than seven feet tall, four feet across at the base, and an almost perfect pyramid shape, dense and slightly undulating. Keep moist and protect this one from dry wind and hot sun.

So get out there and plant it, California!

~Nancy Schramm
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