

# Success with Conifers

Conifers are an essential element in many Northwest Gardens. Mostly evergreens, they provide year round structure and interest in the landscape. The diversity of conifers available today is tremendous. From miniature rock garden plants to forest giants, there seems to be a conifer for every niche.



*Chamaecyparis (Xanthocyparis) nootkatensis*

## Conifer Sizes

How big will it get? This is a common question from conifer shoppers. There is no hard and fast answer, because conifers continue to grow as long as they are alive- and they can live a very long time. Size can also vary due to cultural conditions. We often state average size of a plant in 10 years, grouping conifers into four categories.

Catagory	Growth per Year	Average size at 10 Years
Miniature	Less than 1"	Less than 1' in height or width
Dwarf	1" to 6"	1' to 6' in height or width
Semi-Dwarf or Intermediate	6"-12"	6'- 12' in height or width Large
Large	Greater than 12"	Greater than 12' in height and or width



*Abies koreana 'Silberlocke'* cones

## Conifer Colors

Look for a variety of colors and textures when choosing conifers. Most conifers are some shade of green, but there are also many with soft blue tones, silvery tones, bright yellows and golds, and creamy variegated foliage. Some conifers have brightly colored cones and pollen structures. Others have new growth that provides color contrast. Others take on winter color that is quite different from their summer look.

## Growing Conifers

There is a conifer for almost every site. Most prefer well drained soil with some summer moisture. Few will tolerate boggy conditions, and those that will grow in wet soil are often shallow rooted and subject to wind throw.

Many conifers, including 2 needled pines (*Pinus sylvestris*, *P. nigra*, *P. thunbergii*, *P. contorta*), true cedars (*Cedrus*), junipers (*Juniperus*), true cypress (*Cupressus*), and some firs (*Abies*) are quite drought tolerant once established. While most conifers thrive in full sun, hemlocks (*Tsuga*) and yews (*Taxus*) can grow in some shade. Fertilize conifers lightly, giving them all- purpose or acid plant food in mid-Spring.

## Pruning Conifers

There are reasons you may want to prune your conifers, even if you have chosen one that will not outgrow its site. Conifers are often used as hedges or screens, and shearing them keeps them dense. Other conifers can be kept more compact by careful pruning.

- **Hemlocks (*Tsuga*), Japanese Cedars (*Cryptomeria*) and Yews (*Taxus*)** are the easiest conifers to prune because they have abundant buds on both old and new wood. They can be sheared heavily without harm, making them suitable for hedges. Prune in the spring just before new growth starts.
- **Junipers (*Juniperus*), Cypress (*Chamaecyparis & Cupressus*), and Arborvitae (*Thuja*)** have buds only where there is green foliage. They can be lightly sheared, but you cannot cut back beyond the green into brown wood. Prune while they are actively growing in the spring.
- **Firs (*Abies*), Cedars (*Cedrus*), Spruce (*Picea*), and Douglas Fir (*Pseudotsuga*)** can be pruned any time of the year by cutting back to a visible bud. These buds occur in both new and older growth.
- **Pines (*Pinus*)** lack buds along their stems or branches. Buds are only present at the tip of the new season's growth. Soft new growth, called a 'candle' can be cut or pinched



New candles pushing on *Pinus thunbergii* 'Thunderhead'

before the needles fully elongate, and buds will develop below the cut. This 'candle pruning' will keep the plant compact and dense. Thinning branches out to open up a pine's structure can be done any time of year.

Many conifers lose their older needles/foliage after 2-3 years, usually shedding in the fall. Pulling the dead foliage or needles out of the plant can be helpful in maintaining health and good appearance.