



Garden Tips from the Cheyenne Botanic Gardens version 3102004

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710 S. Lions Park Dr.
Cheyenne WY 82001
www.botanic.org

Conifers for Cheyenne- By Shane Smith

A plant that holds its leaves throughout winter is known as an evergreen. The term evergreen applies to both broadleaf and those commonly known as conifers. In Cheyenne we have only a few broadleaf evergreen plants that survive so we are limited mostly to conifers for our evergreens. Conifers are plants that have needles or scale like leaves (such as junipers). Most are adapted to grow in dry, harsh conditions. Conifers are great choices in our region because they provide some green to the winter landscape and, when placed properly, can provide much needed wind protection. Their dense growth also provides visual privacy, blocks out noise and makes excellent shelter for birds.

When thinking about where to place a conifer, you should always consider the final size of the plant. They may look small in the beginning but eventually can grow to incredible widths and heights. Also, look up before you plant; avoid planting a conifer tree under a power line or someday it may have to be drastically pruned. Avoid setting tall growing conifers too close to your house as it may cause problems with your foundation or block views from windows. Winter sun coming through a south window can single-handedly warm up a cool room on a sunny day. It would be a mistake to plant an evergreen that would someday block the winter sun in a south window. Avoid planting conifers on the south side of a house. Instead, consider planting deciduous trees (trees that lose their leaves in winter) on the south side of the house.

Using Conifers for Shrubs and Hedges

When we think of conifers we often picture a large pine or spruce tree, but they can also be used as a shrub, hedge or even a ground cover. The mugo pine makes a nice evergreen shrub and tolerates pruning to maintain its shape it is available in three sizes: regular size- reaching up to 15 feet; dwarf – reaching up to 6 feet high and the variety called “mops,” which only gets around 4 feet high when mature. If you are tired of seeing juniper shrubs, you can prune Colorado blue spruce trees to a shrub or hedge shape with great success. One evergreen shrub to avoid on the high plains is the arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*). Arborvitae is almost indistinguishable from a juniper but is not nearly as hardy and is a poor choice for Cheyenne. Unfortunately, you often find arborvitae sold in local discount stores as a “quick growing evergreen hedge”; it should instead be tagged as a “quick dying hedge.”

Never over-prune a mature juniper. If you have to re-shape a juniper in a major way, try doing a little bit over a period of three years. If you prune into an area lacking green it may be unsightly for years.

SOME HARDY CONIFER SHRUBS FOR THE HIGH PLAINS

Mugo Pine- dwarf pine, grows in mushroom shape, height varies with variety and can be shaped with pruning.

Armstrong Juniper- green-grey foliage, globe shape, 3-4 ft. high.

Sea Green Juniper- dark green, dense vase shaped growth, 6-8 ft. high. Takes pruning very well.

Tam Juniper- fast growing spreader, green foliage, tolerates slight shade, 6-8 ft. high. Takes pruning well.

Pfitzer Juniper- available in green or bluish green color, globe shaped, very hardy, 5-7 ft. high.

Old Gold Juniper- decorative golden colored growth, 3 ft. high.

HARDY UPRIGHT CONIFERS FOR HEDGES OR SMALL TREES

(all grow to approx. 15-20' mature height- unless pruned)

Wichita Blue Juniper- blue foliage, good for exposed location.

Cologreen Juniper- dark green foliage, assumes broad pyramidal shape. Fast grower.

Moonglow Juniper- silvery blue foliage, dense compact growth.

Pathfinder Juniper- silvery blue foliage, slow growing.

Medora Juniper- narrow, upright grower, silvery green foliage.

Evergreens as Ground Covers

If you are looking for a dense, drought tolerant, low growing, evergreen ground cover, check out the many juniper options. They provide a dense mat of growth that is very tolerant of drought.

A PARTIAL LISTING OF JUNIPER GROUND COVERS

Bar Harbor- blue foliage in summer, drab plum colored in winter, grows only 7 inches high and spreads to 6 ft. Requires frequent weeding.

Broadmoor- bright green foliage, dense mounding form, grows 16 inches high and spreads to 5 ft. Good choice for low-maintenance groundcover.

Buffalo- bright green feathery foliage, very hardy, 16 inches high and spreads 5 ft. Good choice for low-maintenance groundcover.

Hughes- silver blue foliage, spreads rapidly, 20 inches high, spreads to 7 ft.

Wilton Carpet- low trailing plant with intense, silver-blue foliage, well adapted for slight slopes, grows only 5 inches high and spreads 6 ft. Requires frequent weeding.

Conifer Trees

Conifers are among the most noticeable winter landscape feature on the high plains. They add some much-needed green in winter. Most are relatively quick growing and provide privacy and wind protection. Many conifer trees get large as they mature so place them appropriately. Most conifer trees benefit from winter watering for the first several years after planting; others may need winter watering through maturity.

Remember: To find out what kind of conifer tree you have growing in your neighborhood, follow long-time Cheyenne horticulturist, Gene Howard's tip: **Pines** have needles in **pockets**, **Spruces** have square, stiff, sharp needles, **Firs** have **flat**, flexible needles. Notice how the description starts with the same letter as the type of conifer.

PINES- Have needles in bundles (or "Pockets") of two to five.

Ponderosa Pine- long needles- 3 to a bundle, hardy, drought tolerant, native to Rocky Mountains, rounded top-pyramidal shape, grows fast compared with other pines, after a few years it can stand little or no supplemental water, grows to 45 ft tall. They often lose lower branches with maturity. They drop yellowed needles every fall.

Pinyon Pine- short needles- 2 to a bundle, hardy, very drought tolerant, native to S. Colorado, tends to grow smaller than the ponderosa, can suffer from overwatering when grown in lawns, grows to about 18 ft.

Bristlecone Pine- short needles- 5 to a bundle, attractive bristly "foxtail" appearance, dark green foliage, has interesting texture in landscape, slower growing, grows to 25 ft.

Austrian Pine- long needles- 3 to a bundle, grows similar to ponderosa but not quite as hardy, needs slightly more water than ponderosa, fast growing, oval shape, not native but tolerant to our conditions. Not a great choice for exposed location but o.k in city. Holds lower branches better than Ponderosa Pine. The Austrian pine is more attractive to deer for browsing than Ponderosa.

Limber Pine- three inch needles, 5 to a bundle, native to Wyoming, wind and drought tolerant, open-round topped shape, unfortunately it's harder to find for sale but is a nice alternative, grows moderately fast to a height of 25 ft.

SPRUCES- have Stiff, Sharp, Square-sided needles

Colorado Blue Spruce- fast growing, striking silver-bluish foliage, not drought tolerant, needs moisture, almost perfect tall pyramidal shape, needs winter watering if soil is dry, can grow up to 90 ft and can spread up to 30 ft. but can be pruned to maintain shape (keep size in mind when you plant)

FIRS- Have Flat, Flexible singular needles.

White or Concolor Fir- looks similar to blue spruce from a distance, needs more moisture than the pines but less than a spruce, grows in a pyramidal shape, needs winter watering if soil is dry, grows to 60 ft. and spreads up to 25 ft.

Douglas Fir- soft, one-inch needles that are bluish green in color but not as blue as the Colorado spruce or even the Concolor fir, moderately drought tolerant, fast growing, tolerates some shade, has a loose pyramidal shape, grows to 40 feet.

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