

Conifers: The Backbone of the Winter Landscape

Conifers are considered by many to be the backbone of the winter landscape. Though many deciduous plants (those that drop their leaves) can add winter interest to the landscape in the form of colorful bark, unique branching patterns, or bright berries/seed capsules, conifers are the largest group of plants to hold their foliage in the cold winter months. Conifers that are hardy in our area include: juniper, arborvitae, yews, hemlock, false cypress (*chamaecyparis*), and of course, pine, fir, and spruce. Some broadleaf evergreens are also hardy in this area (i.e. boxwood, holly, rhododendron, etc.); however, this group of evergreens consists of a smaller variety of species that are hardy to our area than the conifers do.

The term conifer refers to plants that reproduce through the formation of cones, which are the female reproductive part of the plant. The needles of conifers are actually modified leaves that allow the plants to carry out photosynthesis, even in the winter. Because they are able to produce enough food through photosynthesis to sustain them during the winter, conifers never truly go dormant. As part of photosynthesis, plants lose moisture through their leaves in a process called transpiration. For this reason, it is important that conifers receive an adequate amount of water going into the winter months.

In general, all conifers need well-drained soil. Some will even tolerate drought conditions, but very few will tolerate excessive wet conditions. Most conifers perform best in full sun or light shade, though there are a select few that can handle full shade. Conifers are similar to ferns (see “The Wonderful World of Ferns” article for more information on ferns) in that they are mostly green and lack the bright colors provided by flowers. Having said that...there are some varieties of conifers that do have unique needle color, in shades of blue and yellow. The beauty of conifers lies in their subtle differences in texture, color, shape, and form.

Traditionally, landscape designers have relied heavily upon juniper, arborvitae, yews, mugo pine, and even dwarf spruce for use in both grouped and individual plantings. While these conifers are very valuable in many landscape situations, there is also a wide array of unusual (and just plain cool) specimen conifers that are better used as focal points rather than in cluster plantings. Using an occasional unique specimen conifer in the landscape in conjunction with other conifer groupings is a great way to start building the foundation of your landscape.