

Make room for dwarf conifers

As I stand in the dense shade of the four giant white spruce trees that ring my backyard, I thank the nursery trade for introducing so many small, city-garden-sized dwarf conifers over the past few years. Unlike the homeowners who planted those towering evergreens forty or fifty years ago, gardeners today have so much more choice. Junipers, hemlocks, pines, firs and false cypress are available in a variety of shapes and sizes: pyramidal, conical, mounding, weeping or creeping, growing from 12 inches to 12 feet.

Where dwarf coniferous trees are concerned, size is relative. The dwarf Alberta spruce, a diminutive cousin of the 100-foot white spruces that surround my backyard, is capable of growing 20 feet tall. While much shorter than the white spruce, that's still a fairly good size compared to a true miniature such as the foot-high Norway spruce, 'Little Gem'. But, even the same plant will grow at varying rates and heights depending on the conditions in which it is grown. "Plants don't read books," says dwarf conifer expert, Jim Lounsbery. So, when visitors to his Vineland, Ontario nursery ask how big a plant will grow, instead of pulling out a reference book, Lounsbery offers his best estimate based on his years of experience and the feedback he receives from his customers.

"People are using dwarf conifers in rockeries, around pools and ponds and in small townhouse gardens," reports Lounsbery. "Even in model railway gardens." In rock gardens, prostrate forms of conifers gracefully drape

City Gardening



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themselves over rocks and creep over the gravel of a scree while upright forms accent the garden with pencil-point spires. Skirting the edges of pools and ponds, green mounds of conifers add a cooling touch while a collection of compact conifers,

'Cole's Prostrate' a good choice in the city

along with a piece of garden statuary, make a charming vignette in a townhouse garden. While Lounsbery toyed with the idea of building a model railway as a showcase for his many rare varieties of dwarf conifers, he decided to leave the work to the growing number of enthusiasts who labour to create miniature landscapes dotted with Lilliputian conifers.

Although most dwarf conifers make ideal specimens for small gardens, some are especially suited to the city. Growing under the dappled shade of giant maples, hemlocks like 'Cole's Prostrate' is a good choice, reaching only 10 inches high and spreading two to three feet in maturity. Thriving in dappled shade and moist soil, dwarf hemlocks look right at

home growing along a stream or at the edge of a pond. If your garden is streetside, roadside salt becomes a problem in the winter. Although no plant prefers, these conditions, black pines are generally regarded as fairly salt-tolerant. The miniature 'Kotobuki' is a conical shaped variety that grows only three feet tall in ten years.

"One of the best of the dwarf conifers for small city gardens," according to Lounsbery, "is the Hinoki false cypress." Very slow-growing at a rate of about 1/2 to 1 inch a year, *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana gracilis' rarely outgrows its space, reaching only five feet in 20 years. Although the green varieties of the Hinoki false cypress are tough, Lounsbery cautions that the golden forms such as *C. obtusa* 'Nana Lutea' need

protection from winter sun and wind, performing better in shaded and sheltered areas

"Most conifers are low maintenance," says Lounsbery. "They hate wet feet and heavy clay soil." Grown in well-drained, humus-rich soil, coniferous trees settle in, requiring little more than frequent deep waterings in the first few years of growth as well as in the fall before the ground freezes. In addition, they'll benefit from an annual spring application of a high phosphorous, slow-release fertilizer especially formulated for evergreens.

Low-maintenance, well-behaved and attractive all year long, dwarf conifers deserve more space in our city gardens.

Lorraine Flanigan writes from her shady South Eglinton garden, surrounded by towering spruce. 4-