

# Going Small

## DWARF CONIFERS

**D**warf evergreens are an oddity in our landscapes. These miniature versions of their stately cousins are often viewed as 'genetic freaks' which in actuality, for most of them, bares true. A Norway Spruce (*Picea abies*) will outgrow its dwarf offspring of Nest Spruce (*Picea abies* 'Nidiformis') by over 80ft in its 80 year lifetime. Since these plants are slow growing they are ideally suited to the smaller residential gardens where space is often a consideration.



*Picea abies* 'Nidiformis', the Nest Spruce. A very common long lived dwarf conifer. Some excellent examples can be seen in the Rayner Gardens near the blue park office building. Reaching a height of about 4 metres and a spread of 6-8 metres, it is considered one of the larger dwarf conifers. The Nest Spruce as the name implies resembles a large bird's nest, and in fact I jokingly tell my students that this plant evolved because of the prehistoric Pterodactyl nesting in spruce and eventually compacting them to form the present day plant. A good story but a misnomer nonetheless.

Dwarf conifers are often happenstance, selected by the keen nursery persons eye, they are asexually propagated and inevitably have to be grafted or grown from cuttings to maintain the line.

Occasionally, dwarf evergreens are often found in nature as 'Witches Brooms'; the dwarf version of a tumor like growth. Collected and propagated, they can maintain some of the characteristics of their parents but invariably because of the dwarfing form are quite unique.

These 'Witches Brooms' growths on the plants are often caused by virus induced abnormalities and are considered a bit of a mystery since they are non infectious unlike most other plant viruses.

Ease of care is one of the most desirable attributes of such dwarf plants. Often living beyond our own lifetimes and growing, depending on species and cultivar, at such a slow rate that some seldom exceed a metre in ten years; they are a gardeners dream. Requiring little care they are

well suited to today's shrinking residential landscapes. Effectively combined with ornamental grasses, heaths and heathers, they popularly emulate their stately cousins in rock gardens.

Including conifers in the garden is important from a design perspective as well. The forms, colours and textures are often one of the mainstays that see a garden through the winter. Combined with ornamental grasses, the static forms of evergreens against the dry, waving textures of grass enveloped in snow develop a mystical quality in our gardens in what is considered a dormant and uninteresting time of year.

Entire gardens have been developed using dwarf conifers; one of such note is the Gotelli Collection at the United States National Arboretum in Washington, DC. This particular garden uses hundreds of various forms of dwarf plants, some worth tens of thousands of dollars. Planted on a slight slope, emulating a mountain landscape they are effectively combined with other dwarf perennial plants and gravel mulch. Closer to home, many cultivars can be viewed at the Royal Botanical Gardens in Hamilton, the Montreal Botanical Gardens in Quebec or our own collection in the gardens of Fanshawe College.

Now is a good time to plant dwarf conifers; in fact, anytime they are available if you can provide proper care, is a good time to plant. Dwarf conifers are container grown; they spend their entire lives in the nursery in pots. What this means for the gardener is that when we remove the plant from the plastic pot there is little disturbance to the rootball and hence little or no transplant shock; success with proper care is thus assured.

Every garden centre in the area carries a few of the more common cultivars of dwarf evergreens but for the connoisseur a trip to Canadale Nurseries or Whistling is warranted; where there are numerous cultivars and forms available.



*Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana', the Dwarf Hinoki Cypress often one of the slowest growing dwarf conifers, reaching a mature height of 4' in its lifetime. Remains dark green and could be used as a detail plant (where it is not hidden or lost amongst other plants) or a rock garden specimen plant.

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