



A Rare Find

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Northwest of Chicago, where trees outnumber the people, and the wind whips over tall grasses and fields of ripening corn, lies a nursery like no other. That's because at Rich's Foxwillow Pines, rare trees and dwarf conifers are the norm rather than the exception, and the owner- a conifer collector turned nurseryman- is somewhat of a rarity himself.

Like a modern-day John Muir, Rich Eyre travels the country, determined to preserve a bit of untainted wilderness. But since this naturalist's passion is primarily for garden conifers and rare trees, he also travels with another purpose- that of gathering seeds and cuttings from unusual tree buds (what he calls witches' brooms) to start at home.

Eyre finds these "brooms" (naturally occurring mutations) everywhere- in cemeteries, forests, and byways across the country and around the world. Once he has found a sampling of seeds and cuttings, he returns home, adding these newcomers to the growing collection at his nursery in rural Woodstock.

On just six acres, he now cultivates over 50,000 trees, including 2,500 cultivars (unique forms of more common trees), some 2,000 of which come from the conifer family. Almost all of the trees at Foxwillow Pines exhibit some unique quality- whether it be outstanding color, unusual texture, or extremely slow growth.



Both Eyre and his wife, Susan, hope that this collection will one day become their living legacy.

"My dream is that a thousand years from now, someone will still be lovingly propagating the trees I found in nature," he says.

Toward this end, those who visit Rich's Foxwillow Pines are treated not only to a wide selection of unusual trees, but also to an enchanting visual display that demonstrates the artistry with which these trees can be planted and pruned.

Just behind the white, clapboard farmhouse, lies a garden that looks as though it were planted by Gulliver's Lilliputians, as it is filled with miniature conifers and

perennials. These miniature and dwarf varieties are among the Eyres' specialties, and a popular one at that, since slow growth translates into low maintenance for gardeners. "We like to call them the husband's delights," Eyre says of these trees, which all grow less than six inches per year.



A short jaunt past beds of billowing perennials leads you to the rock and water garden, where a 30-year-old weeping ginkgo majestically presides over the babbling falls. One of only three or four of its kind in the world, this rare tree is as much a source of pride as it is of serene beauty.

Eyre's latest triumph- a meandering brick path through a "forest" of over 100 varieties of Colorado Blue Spruce trees makes visiting the nursery a bit like taking a trip to a miniature botanic garden. The path leads up to a peaceful garden "room" defined by a "wall" of columnar Scotch pines and an arched "doorway" formed by two weeping blue spruce.

Here, as the music of water falling on rocks plays in their ears, visitors are invited to plan their own beds and borders and to soak up a bit of Eyre's gardening enthusiasm as well as his know-how. "Gardening is the single most artistic way that people express something of themselves to their neighbors," he says knowingly.

But it was his mother, Margaret, who first got him interested in rare trees. This interest was then fanned when, as a young man serving in the Peace Corps in Bolivia, he read about bonsai trees and dwarf conifers. There, he dreamed of raising rare conifers for a living. But he never truly believed this dream could become reality until years later when on a tree-hunting excursion, he and Susan, "took a turn down a wrong path."

The couple literally stumbled upon the foremost collection of conifers in any public garden in the United States. "We had never even met another conifer collector before," says Eyre. Much to their delight, the curator at Hidden Lake Garden in Tipton, Michigan, introduced the Eyres to many resources including the American Conifer Society. And they have been

immersed in evergreens ever since.

In 1987, the couple finally took the plunge and started preparing their own six-acre plot for the trees they knew would come. Luckily for them, the property lies in the kettle moraine, where the sandy clay-loam is just right for conifers. But, as Eyre is quick to point out, conifers simply require well-drained soil- something that can be achieved with a little work even in areas where the ground is densely packed and clay-like through the use of raised beds or the addition of soil amendments.

Today, Rich's Foxwillow Pines is just the place for anyone seeking to make a truly unique gardening statement, whether in the sun or shade. In addition to their abundant trees, the Eyres also have strong collections of hosta, dwarf daylilies, and dwarf iris. As with anything both rare and precious, people should expect to pay more for plants that aren't your standard burning bush or juniper.

"Where most nurseries have a lot of common things and a few rare ones, we have a lot of rare species, and few that are common," says Susan. Their roster of rare trees includes ginkgoes, European beeches, weeping mulberries, and larches, as well as many Asian conifer cultivars- another of the couple's weaknesses. Here you might spy a one-foot-tall Scotch Pine that is six feet in diameter one minute, and another Scotch Pine that is 15 feet tall and only two or three feet wide the next.

The amazing variety of trees and plants available at Foxwillow Pines helps the nursery attract customers from far and wide. To all, the Eyres recommend siting plants, as they have done, on a gentle slope toward the house. "By creating a theater of plants, you can enjoy the views they create inside the window of your home," says Susan. To which Rich add, "After all, why give your neighbors all the best views.?"

Since he was first a tree collector and second a nurseryman, Eyre's passion for his product makes him a natural teacher. "Our mission is to make better gardeners," he says. In addition to the advice the couple offer on a daily basis to customers, on everything from pruning and planting to landscape design, the couple also give lectures, slide shows, and grafting demonstrations to all sorts of groups- from horticulture classes and plant societies, to arborists and garden clubs.

When asked, Eyre freely shares his favorite conifers for sunny spaces, including *Picea omorika* 'Nana' and *Picea abies* 'Pumila', as well as for shady nooks, including *Pseudotsuga menziesii* 'Fletcheri' and *Pinus strobus* 'Minuta.'

This August, the couple hosted the 1997 national meeting of the American Conifer Society at their property. In

preparation for this grand event, they worked furiously to improve their already fabulous grounds. But even as they labored, both were acutely aware of how lucky they are. "This is my art form," says Rich, who then adds simply: "I am living my dream."



