

# Catching Conifer Fever



*Chicagoland Gardening*  
Nov/Dec 1997

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Rich and Susan Eyre's nursery is... one part beauty, one part uniqueness, and two parts enthusiasm.

"See that blue color over there? Perfect!" shouts Richard Eyre. He strides- cap jauntily askew, cellular phone in hand, customers trailing- toward the perfect plant through a pathway lined with towering blue, green and golden conifers, glowing against a cloudless sky.

It's planting season at Rich's Foxwillow Pines Nursery in Woodstock, six acres of diverse conifers punctuated with rare cultivars of deciduous trees. Filled with 50,000 trees from 2,000 cultivars, more than 1,500 of them landscape-sized conifers, this is plant collector's heaven. Hundreds of plants you have never seen before are waiting to go home with you.

Unlike most nurseries, Foxwillow Pines is laid out to showcase its plants with benches and chairs in landscaped areas for viewing and study. At the entrance, a large pond and waterfall are visible behind the old willow, which gives the nursery its name. An encircling rock garden surrounds the pond area, spotlighting small plant gems. A new brick terrace tops a low hill and overlooks the nursery grounds. Its entrance steps are enhanced by a pair of dwarf globose blue spruce standards, among other choice plants, while a windbreak of dark, narrow, fastigate Scotch pines controls the breeze.

The diversity of conifer shapes is the most striking feature seen on a walk through the grounds. Weeping hemlocks, prostrate pines, pendulous blue spruce, narrow junipers and dwarfs grafted to standard plants are mixed among globose balsam fir, spreading false cypress, and pyramidal spruce conifers. Those diverse silhouettes highlight a mix of colors, including yellow and white needles of a *Taxus cuspidata* 'Bright Gold', lacy golden *Chamaecyparis* boughs, or a Korean fir with violet purple cones. An area of brilliant blue Colorado spruce adjoins another plot filled with many shades of green, from the light green of a larch to the deep green of a hemlock. Conifers are ranked by size: miniature, dwarf, intermediate and large, and all sizes mingle here.

But the specialty of Foxwillow Pines is dwarf conifers, slow growing plants such as prostrate juniper or short-needled pine that may reach a height of only two feet in ten year's growth. "We have one of the largest collections of Zone 5 dwarf conifers anywhere in the world. We are the conifer specialists in the Chicago market," says Rich with his unusual passion, while his wife Susan nods in agreement. "Dwarf evergreens for some reason fail to attain the size and stature of the parent plant. True dwarfs can stop growing at three feet," continues Rich, speaking with the zeal of an evangelist intent on converting the masses.



from him.

"Dwarf plants are distinguished from simply small plants by their short growth between nodes," explains Rich. "Note the ratio of height to width in these plants. It doesn't change with age." He points out that they look best planted in small groups and are appropriate for smaller sized landscapes.

Continuing in our discussion, Susan Eyre asserts, "You can't buy a plant from us. You adopt it. Rich is a collector turned nurseryman, so the nursery has a unique attitude. It



is more like a plant adoption service and we're just trying to find them good homes. What can you expect of two people who are certified members of ACS (Addicted Conifer

Syndrome) support group and who make their living growing and selling the plants they love?"

Rich and Susan began with six acres, purchased in 1983, on a site near Woodstock where the fast-draining gravel-clay loam was suitable for pines. Since then they have purchased an additional thirty acres farther out for large trees.

Rich has always been a gardener and plant collector, strongly influenced by his family. It could be that he was fated to grow conifers. His mother grew trees in a home nursery for the construction business. Later, while serving in the Peace Corps in Bolivia, a stroke of fate brought him to a Brooklyn Botanic Garden handbook on bonsai and dwarf conifers. It was there that he conceived the idea of raising rare conifers for a living. Helped by Susan, a biology teacher, and his mother, he planted his first trees in 1987. Since that time, his collection has grown at a formidable pace as he searches for trees both new and rare, i.e., hard to propagate.

In another stroke of fate, a chance choice of road brought him to the Harper Collection of Dwarf and Rare Conifers at Hidden Lake Gardens in Tipton, Michigan. He considers Justin Harper, who formed the collection, his mentor. Both Susan and Rich donate speaking fees to the Harper Endowment Fund at Michigan State University to preserve the collection for perpetuity.

Having become experts themselves, Rich and Susan now share their expertise willingly. Last March, at the Chicago Flower and Garden Show at Navy Pier, Rich demonstrated grafting procedures. Seated at a table in front of his display garden, wearing his green American Conifer Society cap, he spoke to visitors crowded around him. "I've come full circle since my mother watched a pine grafting demonstration in

the 1950's at a similar show at the International Amphitheater, and I'm honored to share my passion for grafting now."

"Grafting makes a true genetic copy of the mother plant, and we don't know the father," he says, as he waves a hand over cuttings and deftly inserts a fir whip into an angled cut he has made in the scion stock chosen for strong root growth. "Roots are everything. A tree is no better than the roots on it." Several months later, the grafts are rooted and growing in a misted hoop house.

Rich has definite ideas on how conifers should be used in the landscape. "A garden should look like a garden even in bleak winter. In fact, evergreens are four season plants." In spring, their new growth displays extra richness. During summer they become a background for splashy flowers, while in fall their colors contrast with red and yellow autumnal leaves. Winter brings a change to darker or golden colors that are etched by snow.

"What our plants do is increase possibilities of how you can landscape your yard. You don't have to plant all the same things in a row. Site plants where you can enjoy them when looking out from your home. Why give the neighbors across the street the best plants to see? Plant in groupings and paint the landscape with an expanded palette of color, form, pattern and texture," says Rich. "Use fastigate plants that add height but leave a narrow footprint in the landscape. Conifers with slow growth and restrained size are in perfect scale to suburban homes and lots. It's easy to landscape for fifteen years ahead."

Interest in dwarf conifers is increasing as gardeners see their slow growth and restrained size as valuable in home landscapes. Other collections of dwarf conifers can be seen at the Morton Arboretum and Chicago Botanic Garden where Rich has donated plants. Speaking of Rich and Susan, Kris Jarantoski, Director for the Chicago Botanic Garden, says, "I always think of them as a pair. They have been good friends of the Garden, and generous with their time and plant expertise. The Chicago area is very lucky to have a resource like Foxwillow Pines."

Ever the idealist, Rich sees himself some years ahead establishing an arboretum. Eventually he wants Chicago to have a world-class garden on Michigan Avenue south of the Art Institute. Whatever the future, Susan says, "We are having a great middle life adventure. Life is to be enjoyed."

But a visit to Rich's Foxwillow Pines carries with it a warning: choose carefully when wandering through the conifer nursery. Buying one cunning dwarf is like eating popcorn. When do you stop?

