



Collector is crazy for conifers

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Giving grower donates much of his profits

Some people call him eccentric, some people call him obsessed. Rich Eyre doesn't seem to mind. He tells you himself he's a little wacky about conifers.

In fact, in one of his catalogs, he explains that the letters ACS for American Conifer Society really stand for Addicted Conifer Syndrome, and outlines the levels of infatuation with the plants.

You discover very quickly his enthusiasm for these ever-green trees the minute you set foot in his nursery, Rich's Foxwillow Pines in Woodstock.

He comes barreling down the wide gravel drive, asks what you're looking for, do you need landscaping design help, what sort of shapes do you like?

The thing is, you can't decide right off. Who could, with the endless number of varieties before you, huddled together like tree caricatures in a wild forest?

It's overwhelming, but Rich and his wife, Susan, are there to help.

"It's not rocket science," said Rich. "I take a walk with someone, see what they gravitate toward – soft needles of fir trees or long needles of white pines, weeping or pendulous forms. Once I get a general read, I show them what they can do for the amount of money they want to spend."

If you bring a picture of your house, along with its dimensions, then select some conifers, he'll help you lay them out in a pleasing pattern.

Generally, he suggests not to over plant the front yard, which is typically done with evergreens.

Instead, he said, put your plants in the back where you look out from your home," he said.

Eyre launched his business in the late '80's. His love affair with plants began when he was a child. His mother brought home a catalog from a Chicago Flower & Garden Show. Then, while serving in the Peace Corps in the Amazon jungle in 1968-1970, he pored through books on horticulture, including one on conifers in a series from the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

When he came home, he started managing real estate his family owned, planting conifers wherever he could on the properties. Sometimes he would drive as far as Lake County, Ohio, where he knew he could find unusual varieties.

But it was on a trip with Susan that he took a turn that really changed his life, he said. They had accidentally taken a wrong road, but serendipitously, it led straight to the Harper Collection of Rare Conifers at Hidden Lake Garden at the Michigan State Arboretum in Tipton, Mich. The curator there, Jack Harper, introduced Eyre to the American Conifer Society that had been launched only a few years earlier.

I never knew any other [people] who loved these trees as much as I did. I began talking to the old-timers of the society, and they started teaching me their tricks," he said. He also became acquainted with the collection's namesake, Chubb Harper, who became his mentor.

Within a few years, he had purchased 6 acres on the outskirts of Woodstock and started his nursery.

"In 1987, I hauled in five dump-truck loads of horse manure and prepared the beds," said Eyre. "I bought some 3,000 rare trees from Peter Orum at Midwest Groundcovers in St. Charles, and also started going out to Oregon and buying trees off the West Coast. Through my society I discovered who the best growers and suppliers were and I started networking with them. In 1988, we planted out the first plants, and in 1989 we had our first sale."

Some of Eyre's success can be traced to his big heart.

He donates all the profits from the sale of perennials at his nursery to the Heifer Project, a program he learned about while in the Peace Corps. It helps people in Third World countries counter poverty and hunger through donations of livestock and poultry. Last year, he was able to give \$36,000 just from the sale of perennials, he said. And it's not beyond him to challenge someone who is buying a tree. "Double the amount on that price tag, and I'll give it to Heifer," he'll say.

In addition, he has been generous in donating his plants for landscaping for horticultural societies and nonprofit groups. Just last year he gave a collection of conifers to help re-landscape the entrance to the Lincoln Park Conservatory.

"He wanted to have a big conifer presence somewhere in a very prominent city site, and we had the site, as well as a...landscape that needed refurbishing," said Adam Schwerner, deputy director of conservatories for the Chicago Park District. "He brought us some of his most choice plants, and it's been wonderful. He's transformed that garden into quite a magnificent place."

On Sept. 12, Eyre will join efforts with the conservatory and the Heifer Project with "Graze and Grow" from 6 to 9:30 p.m. at the Lincoln Park Conservatory.

The evening will celebrate Heifer Project International's success with music, a silent auction, a plant sale from Rich's nursery and presentations by HIP and local project participants. Tickets are \$75, which includes a buffet and wines. For information, call (815) 338-7442.