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By Dennis Rodkin

When Tom Hart got ready to replace some aged yews in front of his Glenview home this fall, he knew he wanted to start with some evergreen shrubs. They would provide year-round structure in a bed that, come next spring, also will get a lot of perennials and give the front yard a more current look.

Tired of the ordinary evergreen varieties sold everywhere, Hart drove a little more than 30 miles to a semi-rural spot that Chicago plant connoisseurs have come to know as the garden-conifer capital of Illinois, if not the Midwest. At Rich's Foxwillow Pines, 6 acres in Woodstock that house an enormous variety of evergreen trees and shrubs, Hart found the key to making a distinctive statement with garden conifers; one-on-one time with the proprietor and conifer lover Rich Eyre.

Eyre laid a garden hose out in the dirt to stand in for the bed Hart had back home. He asked the horticulturist's standard questions about sun, soil, and sizes, then started hauling plants from all over the lot to try them in the substitute bed. In a short time, he had assembled a nice group with upright pyramidal shapes contrasted against lower mounding forms to keep the bed looking interesting in the months when perennials are not contributing to anything. Hart was visibly pleased with the result. "Rich has the passion for conifers, which is great, but he also knows so much about them," he said. "He can put things together for you that will definitely work in the space you have."

Hart hadn't called in any favors to get the nursery owner's personal attention. In fact, you have to sneak onto the property to keep from getting Eyre's help. The nursery is literally his back yard and the plants he sells are all straight out of the collection of conifers he has been developing since the 1970's.

Conifers for fun

It includes more than 2,500 varieties of conifers, everything from the common 'R.H. Montgomery' variety of blue spruce to golden Korean spruce to obscure spruce "sports," or mutations, found growing beside Milwaukee streets. And that's only the spruces. There are also firs, pines, arborvitae and other evergreens, as well as some deciduous trees and perennials.

It is, Eyre says often, "the largest collection of conifers together in this climate in the world." But he's quick to add that his achievement "only matters when I'm drinking with my buddies and want something to brag about. It's esoteric and it doesn't matter, but it's fun."

Eyre, 52, has been having fun with conifers since the early 1970's, but he didn't start out planning to sell them. As a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia in the late 1960's, he had come across a book on dwarf conifers and somehow decided when he got home he would start collecting evergreens that bear cones. He and Susan Eyre, his wife and partner in a property-rental business, moved onto the present property in 1983, bringing along thousands of trees. They amassed many more, and by 1988, Rich had assembled so many conifers on the property the only thing they could think to do next was to start selling trees.

The Gardening Corner

King of conifers rules a world of evergreens

Pines for profit

In the decade since, Rich's Foxwillow Pines has developed a loyal clientele among gardeners and landscapers who appreciate the impact well-chosen evergreen varieties have in a garden. "At Rich's you're not looking at a long row of blue spruce," says Mike Ainsworth, an Algonquin landscaper. "You find unusual things like an Ainsley spruce or a foxtail spruce. Every time I go out there, my eyes are opened to all the different effects we can get in a landscape with conifers."

Picea pungens 'Fastigiata' is a slender spruce column whose small footprint suits urban gardens, while *Picea omorika* 'Pendula' is an eerie weeping spruce useful for giving a garden a kind of Gothic droop. There's an even weirder weeping pine called *Pinus banksiana* 'Uncle Foggy' or a ground-hugging pine that takes on a yellow tinge in winter, *Pinus sylvestris* 'Hillside Creeper.'

The transition from collector to retailer has had one pitfall. Most of the conifers in Eyre's collection are classified technically as "dwarf conifers," because they don't reach the towering heights some forest varieties hit. But by referring to them as dwarves, Eyre has turned off some gardeners who don't want to make the drive only to find teensy little plants. "We're starting to use the term 'garden conifers' now to clear that up," he says.

The collection includes some plants that will get no more than knee-high and others that ultimately will reach 30 or 40 feet, although most are very slow growers.

Although planting time is over for this year, fall and winter are good times to tour the collection at Rich's Foxwillow Pines. It's when many of the trees are at their best and also when we are most aware of the places in our gardens that could use year-round plants. Tag plants now for planting next spring or just get the ideas flowing and return later to buy. Sit for awhile on the nursery's new spruce terrace, a hillside expanse of brick edged with blue spruce and dotted with boulders, and ideas for dramatic ways to use conifers in your own garden will start to percolate.

You'll get the usual treatment from the boundlessly energetic Rich Eyre; his wife, business manager and straight man, Susan; and his droll 80-year-old mother, Margaret. You may even be asked to pose for a photo, as Hart was after the quickie design session.

"Well that was hokey," Rich Eyre said after Susan had snapped a picture of him with Hart, "but life's hokey."

Rich's Foxwillow Pines is at 11618 McConnell Rd. in Woodstock. From Interstate 90, exit Illinois Highway 47 in Huntley and drive north for 13 miles to McConnell Road. Turn right and drive 1/3 mile to the nursery. For information, call 815-338-7442. The nursery is open 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday until Nov. 15, by appointment only after that date. (But we're always here; getting an appointment is easy," says Susan Eyre