



Majestic Misfits

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At Foxwillow Pines in Woodstock, unusually shaped conifers happily break the mold

Tucked into the rolling hills of Woodstock is a collection of trees like few others. Step into this weird forest, this privileged introduction to the world of rare conifers, and brace yourself for some strange sights.

The snow-dusted needles of 2,000-plus cultivars of conifers burst forth in every shade of yellow, green, blue. For those who have been conditioned by Christmas tree lots to believe the evergreen ideal is symmetrically shaped, you'd better have a seat. You'll not see troops of trees, ramrod-straight like soldiers in formation. No, these boys slouch, slump and gleefully run amok. They bear names like Prostrate Beauty, Hornbrookiana and DeGroot's Spire, and they grow just 3 to 6 inches each year as opposed to the 12 inches or more that typical conifers grow.

Dwarf conifers, which are the dominant plants at Foxwillow, are cone-bearing evergreens that fail to attain the size and stature of the parent plant. People don't train these trees to grow in such funny ways; it's nature's caprice. And in his Foxwillow Pines Nursery, Rich Eyre works with nature's twists and turns.

There is an explanation. "What Rich really likes to do," says Susan Eyre, his wife and business partner, "is find mutations in nature, take cuttings in the wintertime and graft them to see if this is going to be a tree of the future. That's where the dwarfs come from- the genetic mutations on regular trees. Sometimes, when people find these mutations on their trees at home, they cut them out, and they're gone forever."

The idea is to give people permission to try something new in their gardens, to turn their backs on symmetry and see how much fun it can be.

"We try to be the conifer specialist in the Chicago market, and we work very hard to change ornamental horticulture as it exists," Rich Eyre says.

Why did he choose to specialize in these unusually shaped conifers? Because he fell in love with them, with their contrary, salmon-swimming upstream attitude that so naturally fits his own.

"The thrilling part for us is to help people create gardens; it's more fun if they do it themselves." Susan Eyre says. "Plus, there's a big difference between a landscape and a garden."

From the perspective of diversity, how valuable is the Eyres' work of mutation propagation?

"Diversity is important within the plant world," explains Kris Jarantoski, vice president and director of the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe. "But these are very unusual plants that wouldn't propagate themselves in nature, so it's not that relevant. They are preserving mutation, but it's more from ornamental interest... From an ornamental standpoint, diversi-

For those willing to go out on a bit of a limb, Foxwillow Pines triumphs as a celebration of misfits, and a highly respected one at that.

Jerry Morris of Lakewood, Colo., is a plant researcher at the Alpine Botanical Gardens in Aspen, as well as a pioneer in the field of conifer mutations. "What [Rich Eyre] has at the nursery are some of the most odd, unusual and beautiful plants in the world," Morris says. "If they're blue spruce, they're bluer. There's not an arboretum I know of in the country where you can see even as many Colorado blue spruce as he has now."

Ed Hasselkus, emeritus professor of horticulture at the University of Wisconsin and curator of the Madison school's Longenecker Gardens, says Foxwillow offers the largest number of garden conifers in Northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin. "It's just an experience to visit there," he says. "They have very cleverly designed their garden to welcome the visitor, and they're very giving of themselves. At the American Conifer Society auctions, Rich always serves as an auctioneer along with donating specimens. That's very much Rich."

Justin "Chub" Harper of Moline, now retired from 25 years as the grounds supervisor for Deere & Co., has known Rich Eyre for six years. "He's a very enthusiastic and gregarious person, and he's become an authority on this group of plants," Harper says. "He has tremendous inventory; if you need something rare and unusual go to Rich's. It's quite a mecca, but it's not mass market. Rich went after this special niche and established himself well."

Husband's delights- that's what Rich Eyre calls dwarf conifers, greenery that grows slowly and therefore demands neither pre-game pruning nor wifely needling.

"With faster growing trees, if a landscape looks in scale when it's planted you've got maybe three great years, and then big time problems," says Susan Eyre. "Most get replaced I would say every 10 years because they're too close to the house, too big."

"What we recommend," says Rich Eyre. "is siting these low maintenance plants and then planting dwarf perennials and annuals to fill in the spaces."

The dwarf varieties typically will reach just 3 to 6 feet by the time they are 10 to 15 years old.

Prices for Foxwillow conifers range from \$10 for a kinoki cypress in a 4-inch pot to \$1,000 for a 30-year old weeping Eastern white pine.

The Eyres live at Foxwillow in a nondescript white frame house that's eclectically furnished. She, with golden pinecone earrings and a zeal to match her husband's, tosses toys to two Corgis. Between bites of chocolate cake, he holds comfortably forth on everything from happy hippies in New Mexico to anti-hunger battles in Bolivia.

Theirs is a freewheeling story with some fateful twists and turns. Blame its beginning on the family tree and one Grandma Eyre, who once got grandson Rich digging in the dirt of her Elmhurst home garden. Turns out he loved it.

Fast forward to 1968, when Rich, then 22 and already a collector of rare trees, was a Peace Corps volunteer in Bolivia. His chance discovery of a book on trees in the supply locker ignited his interest in dwarf conifers. Thus the seeds were sown for a dream to grow.

Throughout the 1970's, he spent some time out west, but mostly collected rare trees and worked alongside his mother, Margaret, in the family's Woodstock-based real estate rental business. Rich Eyre's affability and compassion led, in 1976, to his taking mail to a tenant who decided to bequeath his estate- then about \$10,000 in Santa Fe Railroad stock- to Rich.

In 1980, Rich married Susan, then a biology teacher. In 1986, the two were meandering back from her parents' home in Cleveland when they decided to detour through Michigan. They stopped to enjoy sandwiches and stumbled onto the Harper Collection of Dwarf and Rare Conifers, which is located within Hidden Lake Gardens, the Michigan State University arboretum in Tipton.

"We call it the wrong turn down the right road," Susan Eyre recalls, "because it's the foremost collection of these trees in the Midwest."

Through curator Jack Wolf, the couple learned "Harper" was Chub Harper, who introduced them to the Keswick, Va.- based American Conifer Society, and the networking began in earnest.

By that same year, the value of the railroad stock had quietly chugged up to about \$50,000. It was time for the couple to cultivate their unique interpretation of a nursery business.

In 1988, they acquired their first inventory of rare trees from Midwest Groundcovers in St. Charles which no longer had use for them. That summer they battled the terrible drought and emerged intact that autumn, save for the bristle-cone pines.

The ensuing 10 years were an intense period highlighted by building their customer base and reputation, nurturing the inventory and doing speaking engagements and annual catalog updates. In 1992, they hosted the Illinois-Wisconsin Rock Garden Society meeting and built an appropriate garden for that event. Indeed, they prepared for such events in this way more than once and ended up with myriad specialized display areas on the six acres.

Recent media brouhaha has enlightened gardeners everywhere to Foxwillow Pines' trunk show. An article on Foxwillow Pines graced Chicago Home & Garden magazine's fall 1997 issue, and the nursery was recently featured in Chicagoland Gardening magazine. For the last two years, the Eyres have displayed their special trees at the Chicago Flower and Garden Show at Navy Pier; this year, they presented an Asian theme.

And last fall, PBS aired a segment on Foxwillow on the "Victory Garden."

Serendipity and one Rommy Lopat, editor Weedpatch Gazette, a gardening newsletter in Richmond, snagged that juicy coup. Flying home from Cape Cod one day in 1996, she was reviewing an issue of her newsletter when her seatmate asked, "Is that a Patriot hosta?" Turns out the man was not only a gardener but Russ Morash, executive producer of "The Victory Garden" series.

" 'The Victory Garden' later asked me to do some shopping for gardens they could feature," Lopat says. "They wanted strictly private gardens, but I said you just have to see this one [Foxwillow] is an example of what happens when you become passionate. It's actually beyond a gardening story. It's a story of love and following dreams."

The nursery's customer base branches out from Madison to Peoria, with a 50/50 retail/wholesale ratio. Susan Eyre points out that being a specialty nursery means you have to draw from a broad area and roll out the green carpet when they come." "Rich is a gardener, so he likes to give plants away," she explains. "So he has a "drove-a-long-distance' discount, a 'have-too-many-kids' discount. And if people admire a ground cover or hosta, he's got the trowel out, giving them a start."

Winter and early spring sales may get a bit dormant, but the Eyres aren't. They continue to clock 12 to 14 hours each day, with a mix of speaking engagements, business management, care taking rental properties that they are still involved with, traveling, preparing the new catalog and propagating plants.

But for these two, the bottom line is not the root of all their happiness.

That's why you'll see Foxwillow donations at the Morton Arboretum, the Woodstock Opera House, the Chicago Botanic Garden and other green places.

"We're very excited because we have a dwarf conifer collection. In the expansion we did last spring, we were very happy Foxwillow had the additional conifers to donate," says Jarantoski of the Botanic Garden.

There is also Coniflora. Rich has a dream to someday establish either an arboretum or a database on conifers and use that name. But that's just a dream at this point.

The Eyres have no children, and they plan to leave nursery proceeds to the world of horticulture and other assets to Heifer Project International, their favorite charity, which helps feed people from Mozambique to Maine.

"I'm a dreamer and an idealist; I'd love to turn our work here into a foundation to the Morton Arboretum and the Chicago Botanic Garden," Rich says. " And when a peasant in Honduras gives us thanks and tells us how we helped his starving children, now that's worthy of a person's life."

But dreams are for tomorrow, and today it's spring in Woodstock. For those who are not only tired of winter but the same old trees all their neighbors have, it's time to step into the weird forest.