



Pining for the Evergreens

Love of Conifers Beats at the Heart of Local

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Some people call him eccentric, some people call him obsessed.

Rich Eyre doesn't seem to mind. He tells you he's a little wacky for being so in love with 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 evergreen trees the minute you set foot in his nursery, Rich's Foxwillow Pines in Woodstock.

He usually comes barreling down the wide gravel drive like a big huggable bear; his arms wide open in welcome. He asks what you're looking for; do you need landscaping design help, what sort of shapes do you like?

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 straight out of a Disney movie?

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

"It's not rocket science," Rich Eyre said. "I take a walk with someone, see what they gravitate toward- soft needles of fir trees or long needles of white pine, 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 says, put your plants out in the backyard, create a vista that you can enjoy yourself.

"Make a beautiful garden in the back where you look out from your home," he said.

Eyre launched his business in the late '80's after a lifelong love affair with the plants that began as a child when his mother brought home a catalog from a Chicago Flower and Garden Show.

Then, while serving in the Peace Corps in the Amazon jungle from 1968 to 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 working on 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 brain-damaged coniferites 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 namesake of the collection, Chubb Harper, who became his mentor.

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

"In 1987 I hauled five dump truck loads of horse manure and prepared the beds," Eyre said. "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. The business has grown like a rocket taking off."