

Conifers for Fall Color

By Valerie Jean Rose

October 14, 2011



“Winter is an etching, spring a watercolor, summer an oil painting and autumn a mosaic of them all.” -- Stanley Horowitz

Fall color means more than just maples

Familiar autumn changes are here. Mammals grow thick fur coats, people wear warm wool hats and eat hot soup, while cool winds carry a kaleidoscope of leaves from deciduous trees. Maples provide some of the flashiest fall foliage. The colors of the northwest native Vine Maple are usually the first to change, an overture into the autumn season. The leaves of another native, the Big Leaf maple, often rush from green to brown with little time spent displaying shades of yellow. Japanese maples turn dazzling shades of burgundy, gold or tangerine, while many other deciduous trees and shrubs dazzle with a shifting mosaic of hues.

But after the leaves fall, naked limbs may leave the garden looking muddy and monochromatic. “I’ve witnessed some landscapes having too much deciduous material,” says Roger Ragusa, retail sales manager at Wells Nursery in Mount Vernon. “In the dormant season the landscape looks like a bunch of sticks. Simply consider adding colorful evergreen conifers, whether in the design stage or when rejuvenating one’s landscape.”

Colorful Conifers

Conifers are trees (and a few shrubs) whose seeds are contained in woody structures that are often cone-shaped. “Conifers offer year round interest as they are evergreen,” said Ragusa. “A number of species have cultivars which offer colors other than green. Many plants provide blue, gold, variegated or variants of green colors.” As the deciduous leaves fall, the evergreen’s presence is unchanged.

Color is only one feature provided by conifers. “Form, habit and texture all compliment or contrast with other materials,” said Ragusa. Set a low-growing *Abies Concolor* ‘Blue Cloak’ shrub among green-leaved deciduous trees or shrubs and enjoy the contrast of green planes next to arches of teal-gray needles. The leaves will eventually wither and fall, while the conifer needles provide color through the seasons.

Evergreen and Gold

The *Thuja occidentalis aurea* 'Golden Thuja' is an evergreen with lacy green foliage tipped in yellow-gold. This fast-growing arborvitae can bring a year-round glow into northwest landscapes sometimes void of light in the winter.



Jillian Kaufman of Mount Vernon stretches her arms around a blue-colored conifer, *Abies concolor prostrate* GH Blue Cloak, that offers year-round interest in a landscape. **Photo by Roger Ragusa.**

Northwest gardeners can successfully incorporate conifers from many parts of the world, but don't overlook those already adapted to this area. "A number of ornamental conifers are cultivars of native plant material," said Ragusa. "Pinus contorta 'Chief Joseph' is a wonderful example of a golden variety of Lodgepole Pine. Widely sought after and difficult to find, this is a superb example of a native cultivar."

Though the weather may not be ideal for sitting in your garden, this is an excellent time to plant trees and shrubs. Let the fall and winter rains irrigate your new plantings, says Ragusa. "Plants will benefit from installation at this time and will root throughout the season. When the plant is established, usually on its

second year, plant performance and true color accentuate. If color seems inaccurate, fertilizing may prove beneficial."

Not This Variety, Deer

Avoid planting a short-lived deer buffet by selecting evergreens they don't enjoy. Choose from a wide array of distasteful conifers – you may find them lovely, but they won't appeal to the deer's palate. Varieties of *Chamaecyparis*, or False Cypress, range from dwarf trees often used for bonsai to the 80 foot tall Alaska Cedar. Foliage can be silvery blue-green, as found on the *Cyano-Viridis* variety "Boulevard," to the golden hues of many Hinoki False Cypresses, along with other varieties displaying shades of green. Sunset's Western Garden Guide includes the False Cypress in their "Deer-Resistant Plants" section. Other conifers such as spruce, pines, Douglas fir, redwood trees and juniper shrubs are also excluded from the deer menu. Unfortunately deer adore young western red cedar saplings, so these must be well-fenced until they are tall enough to withstand a hungry herd.

Other than sometimes becoming deer snacks, conifers are refreshingly hardy. "Many are well-suited to our climate," said Ragusa. "As a general rule, most conifers are free of both fungal and insect problems. That being said, some materials are slightly more

susceptible to these problems than others. And plants are most vulnerable when they are stressed. Once in this condition, insect and fungal problems may have the upper hand. Provide good soils, maintain the health of your plant and it will reward you for many years.”

Ragusa will share his extensive knowledge of “Conifers for Color in the Landscape” at this month’s free *Know and Grow Workshop* (see Infobox for details.) Ragusa also presented this talk at the Northwest Flower and Garden show in Seattle this past February, when ideas for garden color were even more welcome than usual. “Winters in the Pacific Northwest easily last five months out of the year,” Ragusa said. “Select material that will provide winter interest as well as year round. After all it’s your landscape, enjoy it every day and night.”

Become a Master Gardener Volunteer

Learn to be a Master Gardener! Join a great group of volunteers. Help others learn sustainable gardening methods. The 8-week class series begins late January 2012. Classes meet weekly in Skagit County, with additional on-line readings and quizzes. Cost: \$400 with \$200 refunded upon successful completion of class and year-long internship duties. Applications, due October 31, 2011, are available at <http://skagit.wsu.edu/MG/apply.htm> or by calling the WSU Skagit County Extension office at 360-428-4270.

Come to a Master Gardener Know and Grow Workshop!

What: “Conifers for Color in the Landscape,” a WSU Master Gardener *Know and Grow Workshop* with Roger Rugosa.
When: Tuesday, October 18
Time: 1:00 PM – 2:30 PM
Where: WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research & Extension Center
16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)
Cost: Free (Come early for a good seat!)
More Info: Call WSU Skagit County Extension at 360-428-4270, ext. 0

RESOURCES:

- Great Shrubs for the Pacific Northwest, WSU Clark County Extension:
http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm_tips/GreatShrubs.html
- Conifers for Gardens: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, Richard L. Bitner, Timber Press, 2008