

Conifers for Winter Color in the Landscape

by Mark Priebe

WINTER'S LONG NIGHTS AND COLD SHORT DAYS bring magic to the conifer world. Some turn a dark green. When covered in snow the contrast is striking. Others play a more colorful tune like bronzing. Some play the blues. Yellows brighten the day, but purple may be the call of the day.

Conifers have been a favorite of mine forever, they have an artful architecture, strong and powerful, standing up to the sky, or weeping gracefully over boulders, ponds, and walls. When the leaves have fallen, it is time for the conifers to become the dominant feature in the landscape, with all of its different textures and forms.

Conifers are useful as the main attraction in the landscape bed. In winter, the color of conifers can be used to make a striking show in the grassy meadow or the perennial bed. Standing tall, weeping, or spreading, conifers add color and strength to the beautiful winter landscape.

Gold- or yellow-foliaged conifers, such as the Gold Thread Cypress, *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera Aurea', can highlight dark green conifers. Plant this thread-like foliage conifer in front of *Picea orientalis* to make this tree stand out.

Conifers with dark green or blue foliage can be used as backdrops for winter-berried shrubs, evergreen or deciduous, also trees and vines. *Ilex verticillata*, the winterberry holly, is striking planted in front of *Cupressus arizonica* var. *glabra* 'Blue Ice', with its icy blue twigs of foliage.



Cupressus arizonica var. *glabra* 'Blue Ice'

Learn the color of winter. It's a great time to see life, almost in still life, even when frozen. Up close there's a lot going on. Insects are active on good days. Be observant and adjust to the light. Stand close and look into the plant foliage. Now slowly back up until the landscape is in its familiar view. Notice how the colors work in complementary tones. Enjoy!



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Ed Note: All photos ©Mark Priebe. For a full-color version of this article, go to the HPS/MAG website, www.hardyplant.org.

List of Conifers for Winter Landscape Color

***Cedrus atlantica* (Glauc Group) 'Glauc Pendula'**—Weeping Atlas Cedar. 15–20' tall and wide. An old favorite. This weeping tree is so cool that it's an art form at Grounds for Sculpture. Bright blue-needled foliage;



Cedrus atlantica (Glauc Group) 'Glauc'

large and can be trained into whimsical shapes! Of course, do not forget *C. a.* (Glauc Group) 'Glauc'. Another old favorite. 60–100×40'.

***Chamaecyparis thyoides* 'Top Point'**—Dwarf Atlantic White Cedar. Foliage is starry shaped. This narrow upright conifer has purple-blue color for the winter. Grows 3–5" a year to 6'. Great for the rock garden and railroad garden.

***Cryptomeria japonica* 'Elegans'**—Japanese Plume Cedar. Deep purple winter color. This soft cryptomeria will thrill all with its display. Spread the foliage to see the green inner color. Grows to about 20' with lots of organics

in the soil. Also *C. j.* 'Elegans Nana'—Dwarf Japanese Cedar. To about 4'. Bronze-purple in winter. Grow both in full sun.

***Cupressus arizonica* var. *glabra* 'Blue Ice'**—Arizona Cypress. Powdery blue foliage. The scaled foliage is small and the bark is cool, too! This handsome tree is really good looking all year long. Ranges from 15–40×12–20'.

***Juniperus horizontails* 'Mother Lode'**—Creeping Juniper. This yellow juniper hugs the ground and can be used under darker colored conifers to show them off. The yellow turns to a pinky bronze on the tips. About ½' in height.

Juniperus virginiana—Eastern Red Cedar. This East Coast native bronzes in our winter landscape. Easy to grow; to 20'.

Microbiota decussata—Russian Cypress. Great ground cover. The foliage changes from medium green to a bronzy purple in full sun, however this conifer can grow in shade. Watch out for blight. To 1½×3–12'.



Picea pungens & *Cephalotaxus harringtonii*

***Picea pungens* 'The Blues'**—Weeping Colorado Blue Spruce. A great dwarf, weeping form from Larry Stanley that he found growing on a prostrate form of the species. Good powder blue winter color with strongly weeping branches. Contrasts well with yellows and dark-colored conifers. Full sun for best color. To 6'.

***Pinus contorta* 'Chief Joseph'**—Dark green in summer, as days shorten and temperatures drop, this broad, upright, dwarf Lodgepole Pine changes dramatically to gold and holds the color from October to late Winter. The Chief is outstanding. Slow growing (3–6"/yr) to about 6×4'.

***Pinus strobus* 'Hillside Winter Gold'**—Turns deep golden color in winter. Plant this narrow, upright White Pine selection in front of dark-colored



Pinus wallichiana 'Zebrina'

conifers for contrast. Contrasts well with blue-foliaged conifers. Grows about 8" a year to 30–40×15–30'.

***Pinus strobus* 'Louie'**—A cultivar of the Eastern White Pine with bright golden yellow needles year-round. This symmetrical, broad pyramidal tree provides a hot spot averaging 8–20×10–15'—a true gold nugget in your landscape.

***Pinus wallichiana* 'Zebrina'**—Himalayan Pine. Creamy white variegation comes on strong after the first frost. Long needles make this larger pine even more majestic. Grows

to about 30'. ***P. w.* 'Frosty'** has almost white needles. Both are outstanding for winter interest.

***Platycladus orientalis* 'Morgan'** (syn. *Thuja orientalis* 'Morgan')—Oriental Arborvitae. The foliage is held in vertical sprays. Morgan grows to about 6'. The lime-yellow foliage turns orange for the winter.

For most conifers, good drainage is required.

Planting Conifers

In the Mid-Atlantic area, autumn is a good time to plant most trees, including conifers. Do not dig the hole any deeper than the root ball.

Dig a hole twice as wide as the root ball. Plant the root ball no deeper—or slightly higher—than the existing ground level. Back-fill with the same soil. Soak by watering deep and long. Prevent the root ball from drying out, but do not keep it too wet.

—Iseli Nursery
www.iselinursery.com

Conifer Sources

Wholesale

Stanley and Sons Nursery
Iseli Nursery

Local

Rare Find Nursery
Wolf Run Nursery/Landscapes

Mail Order

Broken Arrow Nursery
Conifer Kingdom
(specializes in dwarf conifers)
Arrowhead Alpines
(specializes in small conifers)