

CONIFER DIVERSITY CREATES A MORE

By Mark Hughes

As we move into spring, think about what you saw when you looked out your windows during winter. What did you see?

A boring vista of brown, dried foliage and snow-covered lumps of herbaceous perennials that had died back to the ground? For those of us lucky to have a variety of conifers in our landscapes, our memories are a bit livelier – and more colorful.

Due to their habit of retaining their needles all year, conifers can give a landscape year-round interest, color, and texture. They are versatile in the landscape and can be used as specimens, hedges, privacy screens, and backdrops for ornamental shrubs and flowering plants.

There are many other reasons to have narrowleaf evergreen (conifer) trees in a landscape including their ability to provide wildlife habitat and to protect structures from the worst ravages of wind and snow. There can also be economic benefits. Used to create a wind-break on the north or west side of a home, they can help lower utility costs by moderating temperatures around the structure. One of their best benefits is adaptability to our challenging environments.

Although many often refer to all conifers as pine trees, Wyoming is home to many native conifers, including three species of spruce, five species of pine, and three species of upright juniper. Subalpine fir and Douglas fir are also



A diversity of conifers paints this colorful fall landscape.

common natives. In addition, dozens of introduced conifer varieties thrive in Wyoming landscapes.

Pines Still a Good Choice

The mountain pine beetle epidemic has taken a heavy toll on Wyoming pine trees. Mountain pine beetle is a native insect, but the recent epidemic should not deter anyone from planting pines. Most species of pine are well-adapted, drought tolerant, and relatively fast growing. The large-scale invasion of mountain pine beetle will end and many decades may pass before such an epidemic occurs again.

Perhaps the best defense against similar outbreaks is a focus on conifer diversity. Landscapes with a variety of conifer species are far less likely

to be affected by insect or disease outbreaks.

Whether selecting conifers for replacing beetle-killed trees or adding further variety and interest to a landscape, there are several choices depending on where you live in Wyoming.

Spruce Alternatives

Colorado spruce is commonly planted throughout the state but some good alternatives that have a similar shape are Black Hills spruce, which is native to the eastern part of the state but performs well in many areas, and Douglas fir, which occurs naturally throughout Wyoming. White fir (also called Concolor fir) is native to neighboring Utah and Colorado and is well-adapted to many Wyoming landscapes. It has bluish-green needles and a much softer texture than spruce.



White fir

RESILIENT AND APPEALING LANDSCAPE

Many Pine Species and Varieties

Ponderosa, lodgepole, pinyon, whitebark, and limber pine all occur naturally in the state. Of these natives, Ponderosa is the most commonly planted and develops a very large mature height often reaching 50 feet or more. Pinyon pine is much smaller, averaging 20 to 30 feet at maturity. It is more compact than Ponderosa and very drought tolerant. Whitebark pine is not readily available through nurseries or conservation seedling programs; however, the closely related limber pine is. Vanderwolf's pine, densely branched with blue-green needles, is a variety of Wyoming's native limber pine.

Because of its narrow upright shape, the lodgepole pine is so named because Native Americans used it to construct poles for teepees. However, when planted in a more open yard area, this pine will develop a much more spreading shape.

There are several other introduced pines adapted to Wyoming's climate. Among the more common of these are Austrian and Scotch pine.



Three-leaf sumac

Junipers Come in Many Shapes and Colors

Rocky Mountain juniper is our most common upright juniper and is used in windbreaks and living snow fences but, when planted in more formal landscapes, often matures into a tree-like form. Junipers are drought tolerant and often slow growing, but growth rates are significantly increased when provided additional moisture.

Many interesting varieties of Rocky Mountain juniper vary in shape and color. Wichita blue is a popular variety because of its silvery-blue foliage and open, pyramidal form. A columnar variety named Woodward was introduced by the USDA Agricultural Research Station west of Cheyenne. At maturity, a Woodward juniper can be 20 feet tall and only 3 feet wide. This unique juniper has never been widely available, but some regional wholesale nurseries do grow it. More common in the nursery trade is the similar columnar Medora juniper, which originated from the Badlands of North Dakota.

Accent Plants Add Interest

A landscape design using large conifers as a backdrop for smaller ornamental trees and shrubs can be very appealing and provide even greater year-round color. There are many colorful species of trees and shrubs used for this, and your local county extension office, conservation district, or nurseries can be consulted for those species that perform best in your area.

There are underutilized ornamentals that grow well in most of the state and make a nice accent to a backdrop of large conifers. A few that deserve greater consideration are bigtooth maple, a native western Wyoming small tree; three-leaf sumac, a very hardy native shrub of the Rocky Mountains; and autumn brilliance serviceberry, a small tree with stunning fall color.

Planting a diversity of conifers can greatly reduce the overall impact of insect and disease outbreaks and add to the visual quality of a landscape. As always, consider mature size when choosing planting locations and seek local expertise for species adaptability to your specific growing conditions.



AVIARY HIDEOUTS

One frequently overlooked benefit of evergreens is the shelter provided our feathered friends.

Birds will stay in a yard longer if they can get out of the wind (denser conifers such as spruce and juniper make very good shelter). Conifers also provide privacy by screening views of roads and neighboring properties.

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