



## Miniature and Dwarf Conifers

Miniature and dwarf conifers come in a range of sizes, forms, colors, and textures. Group them in rock gardens, in among perennials, in front of larger evergreens, or nestle them in any space in need of evergreen texture or winter interest. They may also be used in troughs, container gardens or raised beds. With time and patience, a miniature or dwarf conifer may also be shaped into a bonsai tree.

### *what's in a name?*

'Miniature and Dwarf' does not refer to mature size but to a conifer's rate of growth in all directions. Dwarves grow 1- 6 inches per year, reaching from 1-5 feet in ten years, whereas Miniatures grow less than 1 inch per year, reaching less than a foot in ten years.

To put this in perspective, Intermediate conifers grow 6-12 inches per year, hitting 5-10 feet in ten years and Large conifers grow more than a foot a year and reach 10 feet or more in ten years. Remember that, just like all woody plants, conifers will continue to grow at a similar rate for the life of the plant. Overall size will also vary by geographical region and climate or due to cultural practices.

### *placing and planting a miniature or dwarf conifer*

- Most conifers require full sun (six hours), good drainage, consistent moisture, and fertile, slightly acidic soil.
- Before planting your conifers experiment with different design ideas. It is important to know the growth habit, ultimate size and mature shape of your conifer. Immature plants in their little pots are somewhat deceptive and will have quite a different silhouette once they've had a few years' growth.
- When you are satisfied with your garden design, prepare garden beds by adding Turface to improve drainage and amending the soil with Dr. Earth Acid Lovers compost.
- Conifers should be planted at the same level as they are found in their pots or slightly higher. Remove the conifer from its pot and massage the rootball so that the roots are visible. If the roots are tightly coiled, gently pull them outward.

### *care of a newly planted conifer*

- Apply a slow-release organic fertilizer (such as Espoma Holly-tone 4-3-4) twice yearly, once in spring and again in late fall, following directions given for the size of your container or trough or for the conifer's current size if it is planted in the ground.
- Mulch with one to two inches of organic matter or fine gravel to keep roots moist and the soil temperature cool.
- Newly planted conifers need about an inch of water per week, preferably at one or two waterings. Check the soil every two or three days and water thoroughly, deeply, and directly at the roots of the plants.
- Once established, conifers in the ground will need additional water only when it is very hot and dry, while those in containers will need regular waterings.

## *dwarf and miniature conifers in the winter*

For a more detailed explanation, see the tipsheet 'Miniature and Dwarf Conifers in the Winter' – here is a brief summary:

### *Conifers in the garden:*

- Add 2-3" of mulch after several hard freezes (below 25°) to help moderate winter soil temperatures, reduce heaving, and conserve moisture – thus reducing winter stress on the plant.
- Check periodically and water when needed.
- Around mid-December, apply an anti-transpirant such as Wilt Pruf to reduce moisture loss and plant stress.

### *Conifers in containers:*

- Do not bring your conifers indoors – they need a period of cold dormancy.
- Containerized conifers should stay outside in the fall long enough to develop their cold hardiness – until about mid-December – and then should be given some winter protection.
- When temperatures fall below 20°, containerized conifers need to be stored in an unheated garage, inside a cold-frame out of direct sunlight, or covered completely under a secured pile of mulch or straw.
- Temperatures in your storage area need to stay above 15° and you can use space heaters in the garage or heater cables in the cold-frame. On the other hand, remember that if it gets too warm, your plants may break dormancy and start to grow, even if they are covered and in the dark! A minimum-maximum thermometer is very helpful.
- Remember to check your conifers periodically to see if they need water.

## *pruning of conifers*

Very little pruning is needed for most miniature and dwarf conifers. Occasionally, plants may send out a branch that has reverted to its original, large-plant form and these branches should be removed right away. Should you wish to selectively prune your conifers at some point, we include the following guidelines. These hints will also help when choosing and forming bonsai creations.

- Yews and hemlocks are simple to shape, since they have buds on old and new wood. These buds will develop into twigs when the wood above them is cut. Prune them in the spring just before the new growth begins.
- Firs, cedars, and spruce have buds along the current season's growth and can be lightly pruned back to a bud at any time to control size and produce a more dense plant.
- On pines, the buds are only present at the tip of the current season's growth. Soft, new, spring growth, called a "candle," can be cut or pinched in the spring before the needles are fully elongated, and buds will develop below the cut. This "candling" produces a more compact plant.
- Junipers, thujas, and chamaecyparis all have buds *only* where there are green leaves. Their interior branches are leafless and twiggy. If you cut a branch back to this non-leafy region it will not produce new foliage. Prune carefully and only when the plant is actively growing in the spring.

## *further information*

We recommend the American Conifer Society at <http://www.conifersociety.org/>. After entering the site, select "Conifer" to access the conifer base and search by genus or cultivar name for history, information, and some photos.