

# CONIFER CORNER

On the straight  
and narrow...

*By Crystal Walton and Bert Cregg*

To be tall and thin and on the straight and narrow is the perfect way to shine in the spotlight in both Hollywood and in the landscape. In this edition of *Conifer Corner*, we'll look at narrow upright and columnar conifers, one of the eight forms of conifers designated by the American Conifer Society (see sidebar).





*Picea orientalis* 'Skylands' (above and right) combines the dramatic appeal of a narrow conifer with a splash of yellow color. 'Skylands' is a good grower and the contrast between the yellow upperside and dark green underside to the shoots will certainly draw attention.

*Picea glauca* 'Delp's Dwarf' provides another take on the Dwarf Alberta spruce.

Narrow upright conifers are uniquely suited as amazing border plants as well as eye-catching specimen plants. They come in a variety of species, colors, and sizes to serve a range of landscape functions.

By definition, narrow upright conifers include a wide array of plants. The American Conifer Society (ACS) defines narrow conifers as "much taller than broad and includes plants referred to

as fastigate, columnar, narrowly pyramidal or narrowly conical". Narrow upright conifers are useful in a variety of design applications. They add a steadying vertical element to the landscape and are often used as elements of formal gardens. They are widely used for screens, borders, entrance ways, and sectioning off areas. They can also be used as focal points or specimen plants.

Faith in the future? A row of narrow conifers makes an effective screen, but be sure to select intermediate (6"–12" per year) or large (>12") conifers for the job. These dwarf Alberta spruce (*Picea glauca* 'Conica') are unlikely to block the railroad tracks (on the right from the house, just out of view on the left) in anyone's lifetime.



## ***Borders Done Right***

Narrow uprights are a classic choice for screening and privacy. Lining up narrow upright conifers branch to branch, however, can sometimes look outdated. Creative planning of a screen or border can add character to the landscape while defining outdoor space. For instance, the staggered look with plants zigzagging down a line gives depth to the landscape and fulfills the job of blocking the other side. Another suggestion is alternating varieties to provide a variety of colors and textures. For example, use yellow or light green cultivars between darker green specimens of your choice. This effect is visually interesting and the light and dark contrast can provide a sense of depth.

## ***Show Stoppers***

Narrow upright conifers can be used for more than screening purposes. They can scream for attention depending on the placement and type. When used as specimen plants, growth rate of narrow conifers may be less of an issue than when planted as a border screen. Narrow conifers can provide a focal center point from miniature container gardens to large, mature landscapes. Look for form and height to extract uniqueness from the landscape. Using the impressive varieties of narrow conifers can create a fascination for the fastigiated!

### ***Picea glauca* ‘Pendula’**

A beautiful narrow spruce with drooping or pendulous branches and gray-green needles that make this a classic example for narrow conifers. This pine takes on a narrow pyramidal form and is hardy to USDA hardiness zone 2. The growth habit is “intermediate” or 6 to 12 inches per year.

### ***Picea omorika* ‘Pendula Brunns’**

It’s not a *Conifer Corner* without including a Serbian spruce. An underused species, Serbian spruce includes this lovely narrow pyramidal cultivar. Serbian spruces have a naturally wonderful, tight pyramidal form and with age comes more beauty! Considered to be a zone 4 hardiness and a large tree. The needles have a bicolor effect with green on top and white below, plus the weeping branches make this tree unforgettable.



*Picea glauca* ‘Pendula’ is a dramatic tree and a reliable grower in Michigan.



*Picea omorika* ‘Pendula Brunns’ is among several narrow forms of Serbian spruce.



Notably narrow. Upright arborvitae such as 'Degroot's Spire' can provide dramatic and effective screens.

Far right:  
Conical Concolor fir.  
Photo credit: Aaron Warsaw

***Thuja occidentalis* 'Degroot's Spire'**

Narrow arborvitae are a classic choice for screening. 'Degroot's Spire' fills the role with an element of class. An intermediate growing, zone 3 conifer with columnar written all over it, this form of American arborvitae is ideal. Its great shape is good for screening and great for accenting other plants in front of or near it. The thick green branches make a solid backdrop for any colorful scene.

***Cephalotaxus harringtonia* 'Fastigiata'**

This fastigiated Japanese plum-yew is a nice zone 5 plant that will grow straight and narrow. Plum yews (*Cephalotaxus*) are similar in many respects to the yews (*Taxus sp.*) that most of us are used to, although currently they are treated as separate families. The fruit looks like a purple grape or plum with green flat needles adorning it.

*Cephalotaxus harringtonia* 'Fastigiata', Upright Japanese plum-yew provides a unique accent in the landscape.



***Abies concolor* 'Conica'**

Concolor fir (or white fir) is one of the top choices in true firs for Michigan. The columnar form discovered in Rochester, New York is hardy to USDA zone 3 and grows at an 'intermediate' (6-12" per year) pace. The very distinct whorls, short single needles, blue color, and compact form are everything a concolor fir fan wants in a tight little package.

***Cedrus deodara* 'Karl Fuchs'**

If you want tall and thin, here is your star. This is a large true cedar which displays a remarkable height with slender and slightly downward pointing tips and is an eye-popper for the landscape with a thin, wispy crown that causes little shading. The true cedars (*Cedrus sp.*) are not widely known as landscape trees in Michigan. *Cedrus*





*deodara* is native to central Asia and is a common ornamental in warmer (zones 7–9) parts of the U.S., such as the Pacific Northwest, and also in Europe. ‘Karl Fuchs’ is one of several hardier cultivars that were selected from the Paktia province of Pakistan (other selections include ‘Eisregen’ and ‘Polar Winter’). They’re listed as zone 6, but have been grown successfully in zone 6, but have been grown successfully in zone 5 in protected sites.

***Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* ‘Green Arrow’**

It is “The Conifer” no one can keep their eyes off of. This outrageous needle-in-the-sky form of Alaska cedar keeps heads turning. There is no middle ground with this plant; either you love it or you think it’s the goofiest thing you’ve ever seen. ‘Green Arrow’ is a large conifer (> 12" per year) and maintains its dark green color all year long. Pruning off any side branches that develop will help to enhance the rocket-straight form. This is quite the remarkable centerpiece for any landscape that has limited space.

***Pseudotsuga menziesii* ‘Fastigiata’**

For all of the Douglas-fir lovers, here is a narrow upright for you! This is an intermediate grower that is hardy to zone 5. With all of the desirable characteristics of a Douglas-fir — the blue-green color, short needles, pointy buds, and excellent full form, plus the narrow shape — this conifer is an easy pick.



*Cedrus deodara* ‘Karl Fuchs’ is a hardy selection of this true cedar.  
Photo credit: Aaron Warsaw

Inset above left:  
*Cedrus deodara* ‘Karl Fuchs’. True cedars are interesting up close because their needles occur on short shoots in clusters of 20–30 needles.



*Pseudotsuga menziesii* ‘Fastigiata’, Fastigiated Douglas-fir at the Bickelhaupt Arboretum in Clinton, Iowa.  
Photo credit: Dax Herbst

*Sciadopitys verticillata* ‘Joe Kozey’

Still looking for something really different? This version of Japanese umbrella pine maintains a columnar habit with healthy green needles. Fossil records of *Sciadopitys* date back to the Jurassic period, making this one of the most primitive of all conifers. According to the ACS, this cultivar was selected by Sidney Waxman from the University of Connecticut for its unique growth habit which is very fastigiate, almost like a telephone pole. It has long narrow glossy green needles at the ends of its branches and makes a useful accent plant.



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(Right) ‘Joe Kozey’ is an upright form of *Sciadopitys verticillata*, a primitive conifer.



**Conifer form classes recognized by the American Conifer Society (ACS)**

ACS Form Class	Description
1. Globose	Globe-like or rounded in general outline
2. Pendulous	Upright or mounding with varying degrees of weeping branches
<b>3. Narrow upright</b>	<b>Much taller than broad; includes plants referred to as fastigiate, columnar, narrowly pyramidal or narrowly conical.</b>
4. Broad upright	Includes all other upright plants which do not fit into categories 1–3
5. Prostrate	Ground-hugging, carpeting plants without an inclination to grow upward
6. Spreading	Wider than tall
7. Irregular	Erratic growth pattern
8. Culturally altered	Pruned or trained into formal or imaginative shapes, such as high grafts or standards

Source: American Conifer Society ([www.conifersociety.org](http://www.conifersociety.org))