

Colorful Conifers

Read any garden magazine and you will find an article on “winter interest” or “four season gardens” and, considering the length of our winters here in Wisconsin, this kind of planting is very important! As we drive around our area we see nice looking winter gardens with dogwood, winterberry, roses, and the skeletons of strong stemmed perennials such as black eyed susans and ornamental grasses.

Another group of colorful plants that also contribute to “winter interest” are the evergreens, but not just green ones! Red, purple, gold, and orange are colors of evergreens rarely seen in our area. Judicious use of these beauties can certainly add excitement to any landscape, large or small.

As late fall wanes and many of the spectacular maples and other deciduous trees have shed their leaves, some of our evergreens start to change—and there is usually no one around the nursery to appreciate it! Since many evergreens don't really show off their mature nature until years after planting, they can sometimes be hard to differentiate. But seasonal changes bring color into the most common looking specimens and can turn them into something special.

One of the best things about most of these “choice” evergreens is that they are bred to grow slowly. So the darling that you fall in love with at the nursery likely won't be a towering monster twenty years down the road.

In our research we found a common concern as the trees age is that the overall appearance of certain varieties can become less bright. To compensate for this, it is recommended to prune, particularly the smaller specimens, to produce more young tips, for these are the parts that get most vibrant.

So where do you plant these striking evergreens? They look particularly good planted near a darker background—perhaps a grouping of spruce or pines, or as a specimen in front of a cedar house. Some of the cultivars provide subtle color while others are hotter, so be sure to mix them if you're adding more than one. Another idea is to combine one with a deciduous conifer, such as *Larix laricina*, American Larch. This kind of combination is particularly beautiful, because as the Larch passes from chartreuse to gold in the fall and finally loses its leaves, the pine or



spruce colors up and takes over the show.

We have also learned through our plant observations and trials, that many of the trees that we ogle in catalogs from the Northwest are not hardy for us. If you stick with the tough white pines, scotch pines, spruce and others, you will be pleased with your success. Also for many, the colder it gets, the brighter their color!

Some of our favorite colorful conifers include:

***Juniper chinensis* 'Daub's Frosted'** - Variegated foliage brushed with bright spring new growth over bluish green inner foliage. A horizontal grower.

***Juniper horizontalis* 'Mother Lode'** - Rich golden yellow changes to bronze in the fall, followed by plum in the winter. Also a creeper. Wonderful!

***Picea abies* 'Rubra Spicata'** - Norway Spruce - This spruce puts on its show in the spring when the new growth is deep red. It is really beautiful, although it does get big. This might be a good candidate for pruning to help keep the color within sight!

***Picea orientalis* 'Skylands'** - Golden Oriental Spruce - A spruce more suited to a lightly shaded location, it's fiercely bright in the winter and spring and retains its chartreuse glow all season long. Very slow growing and dwarf, but still a typical “evergreen” shape.

***Pinus mugo* 'Pot o' Gold' and 'Honeycomb'** - Dwarf mugos with late winter and spring growth that resembles a yellow highlighter. Very bright!

***Pinus strobus* 'Hillside Winter Gold'** - Golden White Pine - The entire tree starts changing from bluish green to bright yellow in late summer and brightens as the winter comes on. Far from being a “sickly” color, this is a showy evergreen that really does get big. A big golden tree.

***Pinus sylvestris* 'Aurea'** - Golden Scotch Pine - Another golden pine, this one has thicker, shorter, coarser needles. This tree has been very bright all winter long.

Spring Ahead . . .

Gardeners start your engines!

What a strange winter it's been! It hardly seems like spring is upon us—perhaps because we really didn't have any warm spell to break up the weeks of cold weather! The ground has thawed and is soaking up a lot of much needed rain.

We worked hard last fall planting and developing many new display beds around the finished pond and cabin. Please stop in and check out our gardens in progress. One of the things we do each year is plant some of the more uncommon varieties in our inventory and monitor their hardiness and growth. Please come by and see the Korean Fir, Northern Sweetgum, and more. Spring is so exciting at the nursery!

On a personal note, Benjamin is eighteen months old and very busy “working” at the nursery. What a place for a child—water, dirt, chips, bark and trowels. He loves it!

Thank you all for your business, and we look forward to seeing you soon.

Bill Kappler and Lisa Ashley

A Meeting with Piet Oudolf

Where do plant addicts go when they take a day off? Well, this fall our travels took us to one of our suppliers, Midwest Groundcovers in Northern Illinois, to visit with world-renowned, Dutch landscape designer, Piet Oudolf. Oudolf has recently designed, and that nursery has installed, a very large garden encompassing their office and entry grounds. He was there to present and introduce the garden and to answer questions.

Sun-bleached hair, weather-beaten skin, and a robust attitude about nature and the outdoors, he made visitors feel welcome and at home. This was a man who has spent time in the garden!

Piet Oudolf's work is intriguing because he challenges us to look at plants differently. One way he does this is to create gardens that are a balance of plants in their prime, as well as plants coming into, and leaving, their prime. It's certainly a concept that frees the gardener from the tedious chore of shearing! But another consideration is that the color and structure

of plants that are dying back are very important components of the garden. Flower color is very fleeting and so the plants that Piet uses look good throughout the year, even as their dead stalks stand under a snowfall. A garden has many seasons, and as Piet says, "...there are many more stages in the life of a perennial that are deserving of study and appreciation than simply the flowers—buds, unfurling leaves, seedheads, autumn foliage, winter's skeletal remains . . ."

But that's not to say that flowers aren't important. The way that Oudolf designs expanses is by relating the forms and colors of flowers and/or foliage. In this way the garden flows easily and naturally to the eye. However, his gardens do not remain "unpunctuated" by contrasting plants; it's just that those plants are powerful and need to be used judiciously.

Oudolf uses mostly perennials, plants that die down every year, and begin anew each spring, but will occasionally make use of a specimen shrub. He does tend to use many perennials *en masse*

while others are better combined intimately with their neighbors. A benefit to using perennials is that if the combination doesn't work out, or you tire of it, you can just move them! Most perennials will even appreciate division.

So we came home ready to create large expanses of Oudolf-inspired garden! We've started planting around the pond and have become excited about using some of our "old" plants in "new" ways.

Excerpt taken from *Designing with Plants* by Piet Oudolf, published by Timber Press, 1999.



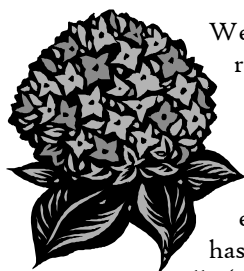
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'Endless Summer' Hydrangea—IT'S HARDY!



We are sometimes reluctant to endorse new plants—after all, there are so many new ones each year, who has room for them all? (Ask us about the disaster of Carpet Roses a few years ago!)

All that aside, we are so excited to introduce you to *Hydrangea macrophylla* 'Endless Summer'—the first mop-headed hydrangea that is truly hardy for our zone 4 climate! The flowers are clear pink in alkaline conditions, or with the simple addition of aluminum sulphate to your soil, you can achieve a lavender blue.

'Endless Summer' was discov-

ered in the harsh climate of St Paul MN where it was studied and evaluated (and praised!) by tree/shrub guru Michael Dirr. The most valuable aspect of 'Endless Summer' is its ability to produce blooms on both old wood and new wood. Other varieties of blue hydrangeas such as 'Nikko Blue' die back to the ground in most winters, usually in spite of deep mulch, and therefore do not mature enough over the season to produce flowering tips.

'Endless Summer' however, even if it dies clear back to the ground, will produce flowering shoots as early as June and continue flowering, if deadheaded, until frost. How wonderful!

Overall height and width of the plant is 3–4'.

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