

Home Gardening

CUMMINGS



A POTTED GUIDE TO...

DRESSING THE WINTER GARDEN

To mitigate a winter garden made barren by sleeping perennials, as well as improve your summer one, think height. Something lofty will instantly make the garden feel more mature.

Try tall columnar evergreens such as Italian cypresses or fastigiate yews, which make great standalone

skYROCKETING structures. Or plump for ready-grown hedging plants like hornbeam or yew, clipping them over time to create a column or obelisk. These can punctuate barren winter flowerbeds; you can also use balls or cushions of evergreen.

Other plants to consider include winter-flowering shrubs such as *Viburnum x bodnantense* and *Lonicera x purpusii*, or something sculpturally multi-stemmed (amelanchier, betula and the like) that you could perhaps adorn with battery-powered lights over the winter months.

Lastly, think about investing in solid objects – obelisks placed in the flowerbeds or on flanking paths are a classic. Equally good are stone urns or balls and huge terracotta pots filled with spring bulbs, then later with summer bedding. Placed judiciously, they allow the eye to journey and eventually settle.

Laetitia Maklouf

IN THE GARDEN THIS WEEK

● Start thinking about what you want to sow this year. Make a shortlist and halve it: this will take you to a manageable amount. It's too early to actually sow, but chilli peppers love a long season, so should be your first port of call. Even if you don't like hot food, dwarf chilli plants are fabulously ornamental.

● Wash and dry all your pots and seed-sowing equipment if you have not already done so. A bucket of hot soapy water outside, a sponge and a pair of rubber gloves is all you need to make you feel everything is right with the world.

● It's worth thinking ahead to your summer containers and hanging baskets; if you order plug plants now, you'll save a pretty penny on late purchases at the garden centre.

● You can cut back Virginia creeper, ivy and Boston ivy to keep them from encroaching onto your windows and into your house. You can also prune roses and fruit trees, as it's easier to make good decisions when the plants are naked and dormant.

● Water your hippeastrum plants (left) regularly to get them growing strongly, and keep a close eye on hyacinths, bringing them indoors and into the warm when you begin to see flower buds.

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WE DIG

Roll up, roll up for the ultimate galthophile event of the year: the snowdrop sale at Myddelton House, in Enfield, north London, where specialist varieties can change hands for hundreds of pounds. The eight-acre garden and museum will also be open. Entry is free, but a donation of £3.50 will go towards the upkeep of the house and garden (Saturday, 10.30am-noon; visitleevalley.org.uk).

Londoners have another galthophile treat next Sunday, with snowdrop talks and tours at 11.30am and 2pm as part of

the Heralding Spring week at the Chelsea Physic Garden, west London (until February 4; chelseaphysicgarden.co.uk).



When it comes to taste, there are few elements of midcentury modern design that are not appreciated now. Fashion, music and interiors continue to inspire, while formerly retro flowers such as dahlias have moved into a higher sphere.

The same cannot be said of British garden style. Looking at old photographs, there is a stubborn and widespread menace in the gardens of our recent forebears: conifers. Large or small, they date a garden even more reliably than hybrid tea roses or weed-free rockeries, and, although the printing processes of the day exaggerate their unearthly yellow-green and blue-green hues, this doesn't excuse their static artificiality. Bring on the gnomes.

Yet conifer gardening was an interesting idea in the 1950s, practised by free thinkers such as Alan Bloom, of Bressingham Gardens, Norfolk. Dotted around a property, with smaller versions in island beds, as a garden rationale it was too easy and too successful. Now the very word "conifer" makes people shudder, with the exception of the very old and the fairly young.

Despite – or because – of all this, smaller pines, cedars and larches are coming back. Tall trees are collected by those with arboreums, but dwarf conifers are being snapped up by younger people, often buoyed by happy memories of their grandparents' gardens.

Helen Tate, of Lime Cross Nursery, East Sussex, has seen a resurgence of interest in small pines as well as abies (firs), particularly the types with "frosted" needles. She sees parallels with the vogue for leafy house plants: "People we meet who don't remember the 1970s are captivated by the more esoteric conifers. Coastal-looking pines also remind them of holidays."



Pine fresh Matt Keightley's design for Chelsea 2017, featuring soft hummocks of dwarf conifers

LOOK SHARP

Conifers, those stalwarts of the 1970s garden, are getting a rebrand and making a break for the fashionable border, says *Kendra Wilson*

Tate and her sister, Victoria, who jointly manage Lime Cross, can be found at the renowned plant fairs at nearby Great Dixter, where fluffy, twisted and droopy conifers are in demand. Their nursery has also been partly responsible for the growing population of strange grey and green conifers arranged in pots around the front door of Great Dixter: the first thing that visitors see on entering the garden.

"As a plant material, there is a wonderful range of conifers, and a lot of dull ones as well," says Fergus Garrett, Dixter's head gardener. "But there are some zany-looking conifers that are real characters."

Garrett has attracted criticism for using them in the highly curated atmosphere of Dixter's exotic garden, with

tufted droops of blue Atlas cedar, 'Glauca pendula', and dangly branches of *Cedrus deodara* under a broadening canopy of banana leaves. "Someone said it was like inviting Donald Trump to a dinner party," he remarks.

This at least demonstrates the effect they can have in shaking things up, though Garrett denies he is ever motivated by a desire to shock. "The exotic garden is a jungle, but there are conifers in jungles," he says. "Their presence turned it into a Himalayan garden, rather than something from Costa Rica."

Being of a generation that remembers the way conifers were, Garrett keenly felt the challenge of doing them well, that "cold-sweat moment" when he wondered if he could pull it off. "I thought, 'If they

make me uncomfortable, why don't I see if I can work with them?' You're thinking, 'Do I like it for its shape and texture, and what it does?'" In his world, every plant is assessed on its merits. A dwarf conifer is not just a type of structural evergreen: "You're looking at the quality of that plant and what it can offer."

If it is a love of plants that sets Garrett apart in a world of received ideas, his unbounded enthusiasm is shared by Matthew Pottage, the young curator of RHS Garden Wisley, Surrey. In his vocabulary, "old-fashioned" is not a criticism, though he can see that a dated perception is not helpful in conveying new ideas. The word conifer is perhaps in need of a rebrand. "I often use the term 'shrubby conifer' for something that stays the size of a bush," he says, "or 'evergreen tree' for a tree conifer."

Since he was promoted to curator two years ago, shrubby conifers and evergreen trees have been on the increase at Wisley, particularly in the new garden areas. The winter walk features ground-huggers as well as eccentric weeping cedars, like gothic characters, that appear to be walking in knee-high miscanthus. A walled garden is filled with shrubs that are being trialled as alternatives to the increasingly problematic box.

Pottage has great hopes for low-growing podocarpus, as well as the dwarf yew *Taxus baccata* 'Repandens'. "Interestingly, taxus has not been affected by fashion," Pottage says. "No one frowns on yew. You can hard-prune it and it regenerates, unlike many conifers."

His current favourites? "I'm a big fan of abies, I have a soft spot for podocarpus, and some of the shrubbier pines have real potential."

At the Royal Horticultural Society's flagship garden, it is important that plants behave as advertised and that they interact well with other plants. Pottage prefers a dwarf to be a "true dwarf" (such as abies), as opposed to a giant disguised as a dwarf. "Abies has short internodes, so its growth is really minimal. If there's a small extension growth, just nip it back with secateurs."

The point is that conifers grow well as a foil to other types of plants, and are harder to pull off as a collection of kindred specimens. They make wonderful pot plants, being able to withstand a certain amount of neglect, though overwatering will bring them to a hasty end.

At the Inner Temple Gardens, in central London, Andrea Brunsendorf grows *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Elegans', juniper and pine permanently in containers, while arranging dozens of tulip pots around them in winter. With a lack of space for storage, the slowly developing bulbs are there for all to see, while the conifers give

a sense of purpose and height to the display.

Brunsendorf finds conifers to be indispensable in the borders, too. "At the front of a border, I use small pines to create a niche," she says. "The dwarf eastern white pine [*Pinus strobus* 'Radiata'] has a silver touch that glitters in the sun, while *P. strobus* 'Macopin' turns a grey-green. They bring a dynamic to the garden in low light."

With the herbaceous planting cleared away, clouds of green pines contrast with verticals of yellow grasses. Golden Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra*) is a particularly good match for conifers right now, while clumps of sarcococca and evergreen ferns provide further verticals and a different kind of texture.

“Conifers are being snapped up by the young, buoyed by happy memories of their grandparents' gardens”



Cedrus deodara is a favourite at Great Dixter

Texture and shape are key to reassessing the positive qualities of dwarf conifers, as is the character each specimen brings. "You're almost taking the name 'conifer' away from it," Brunsendorf says.

This logic is relevant to the use of small pines at the Chelsea Flower Show in recent years. Never is a single plant within a collection assessed so minutely. Matt Keightley, who probably doesn't remember the 1970s, and Chris Beardshaw, who probably does, both offered hummocks of dwarf conifers at last year's show. Charlotte Harris had great success with jack pines (*Pinus banksiana*), which were not dwarf types: they were small trees that implied a Canadian forest.

This is surely the essence of bonsai, and small, fabulously shaped miniature pines are used in the moss gardens of the Chelsea regular Kazuyuki Ishihara. The shape is exquisite, yet there is a sense of wildness, although they are, of course, anything but.

While it may be time to reintroduce conifers into our borders, sorry – it's still a no to gnomes.



The delicate needles of *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Elegans'