

# CONIFERS – AN INTRODUCTION

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“Conifer” is derived from a Greek word meaning “cone-bearing”, and is applied to many of the plants often referred to simply as “**Evergreens**”. Evergreen simply means that the plant does not lose its leaves during the winter, whereas conifer is a bit more specific, and generally descriptive of a plant that has **needle-like foliage** (except the Ginkgo, which is hopelessly mixed up and usually listed with broadleaf trees for simplicity). The conifers are a large group of plants, ranging from the towering Redwoods to smaller shrubs that may not even reach a foot tall. Conifers are generally evergreen, but some, like the Dawn Redwood and European Larch, will lose all of their foliage in winter. Following is some general information on conifers.

## General information

Reliable information on conifers can be difficult to find. Lots of specialty (or even common, for that matter) conifers aren't listed in regular reference books, and when they are listed, those sources often disagree with each other. Whereas you can often tell a deciduous tree's character after a relatively short time (years), many conifers can take generations to get reliable information about. Also, differences in geographic location, cultural practices, and many other factors can alter how a plant behaves. Another confusing point is that there are some conifers that have very different variants that go by the same name. Conversely, there are many nearly identical plants that go under very different names. It's very confusing, as you can see. Our information has been taken from our own observations in this area, as well as many different references, in order to get the clearest picture possible.

## Maximum Heights

Everything in the world of conifers is relative. There are so many variables affecting the landscape growth of conifers that listed growth habits usually encompass quite a wide range. Take for instance the Slender Hinoki Cypress. Some sources list it as a medium-growing tree that will eventually reach 40'. In this area though, when you factor in the generally heavy soils and stresses of the average residential landscape, you end up with a tree that is usually somewhere around 15'-20' tall in any reasonable amount of time. Reasonable amount of time is also an interesting concept. Whereas most broadleaf trees attain the bulk of their ultimate size in 50-60 years, conifers are generally much longer lived and their life progression is often spread out over a much longer time. The largest Douglas Fir in the U.S. is well over 300' tall, but it is probably also at least a few centuries old. And the Douglas fir is one of the shorter lived conifers! A normal Douglas Fir specimen planted in a landscape situation will usually be between 40' and 80' tall, by no means a small difference compared to 300'! To help with this problem, the conifer charts usually have 2 sizes. The first sizes are the reasonable sizes you can expect to see in the landscape after about 10-15 years, and up until about 50-60 years of age. After that in parentheses, the biggest sizes known are given, which are just for reference, and really have little or no landscape value..

## Growth Rate

Growth Rates are also very relative. Conifers can have growth anywhere from 2 inches to 4 feet a year. The amount of this growth depends on several factors, so a general range is about as good as we can give. How rate translates to feet per year is relative to the ultimate size. For instance, a fast growing plant that gets to 80' eventually is going to put on more growth per year than a fast growing tree that tops out at 40' (usually). All in all, this can be very confusing, so please ask if you have any questions.

## **Culture, care and location**

Many conifers like the same kinds of things. Almost all conifers will prefer to be in a well-drained area, as most can suffer from root rot or other afflictions in waterlogged areas. Very few conifers like the shade, and care should be taken to make sure that they get ample light unless noted otherwise. Although not usually a big issue in this area, the majority of conifers prefer an acidic soil (Western Oregon soils are usually acidic). Unless you are deliberately trying to make a hedge or specific shape, conifers should require little or no pruning. Excessive pruning can ruin a plant's appearance, as conifers are not as quick to recover from heavy pruning as most deciduous plants. Poor pruning (or unneeded pruning) can turn a conifer ugly in a hurry. As far as location, also take into consideration the effect the plant may have on its surroundings. A large tree, for example, may compete strongly with surrounding plants for water. In some cases, you may have a large area under the canopy of a tree, but nothing will grow because it is so dry. Once they get established, conifers are generally the tougher plants in the garden, and are able to out-compete most other plants that may have to live in the same area. On one last note, conifers are often more sensitive to chemical damage than deciduous plants. Whereas a deciduous plant can drop its leaves and go dormant in times of stress, conifers don't have that luxury and often fall victim to indiscriminately applied herbicide.