

# CONIFER CORNER

## Upright & Broad: the Blue Collar Conifers

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In this edition of *Conifer Corner*, we are continuing our tour of the conifer form classes recognized by the American Conifer Society (ACS) with Broad Upright conifers. The subtitle “Blue Collar Conifers” is a reference to the unsung status of these important landscape trees.





Strong, silent types. *Picea abies* 'Parviformis' (left) and *P. pungens* 'Montgomery' (right) provide the backdrop to let other plants shine.

If they could, **Broad Upright** conifers would wear Carhartts and carry a lunch bucket. Talk about no respect, even the definition of the category is a definition by default. The American Conifer Society (ACS) guidelines for form classifications are similar to those for size, but these categories are based on the growth habit (proportion of vertical to horizontal growth, and branch structure) rather than growth rate. According to the ACS, if a tree is upright but is not rounded, narrow or weeping it is considered **broad upright** (see sidebar). As with size classifications, ACS, conifer form distinctions can be a bit subjective and also depend upon local growing conditions and tree age. For example, many plants classified as Broad



Korean pine (*Pinus koraiensis*) is a classic example of a 'blue collar' conifer. This hardy and reliable plant can set the stage for other specimens.



Upright, may start off narrow or pyramidal and then become more rounded or spreading with age.

While broad upright conifers may feel like second class citizens compared to elegant fastigiate forms or show-topping irregular forms, it is hard to overestimate their overall importance in landscape design. These are extremely common forms of landscape conifers that serve as the backbone of many landscape designs. The ACS lists over 400 cultivars of broad upright conifers; more than any other single form class. What people may not realize, however, is that this category includes trees of all sizes from miniature to large and includes almost all genera of conifers. Broad upright conifers are extremely versatile and serve as the backbone of many landscapes. Intermediate or large varieties are often planted in a row or are even offset a little to form an effective windbreak. Since these trees grow quickly, both upward and outward, they can be planted at a fairly wide spacing and still provide privacy and protection within a few years. Intermediate trees are sometimes planted in a row and kept pruned as a hedge, but this requires regular maintenance. Remember that broad upright trees will get rather wide at the base, so they should not be planted too close to a structure or walkway.

The natural form of broad uprights is usually so desirable that many landscapes include one as a specimen tree. This is the tree that first draws the viewer's eye and maybe even draws the whole viewer close in order to feel the foliage or bark. Kerry Gee of Gee Farms near Stockbridge, Michigan, advises landscapers to spend half of their budget on a single specimen tree, and then use the other half to fill in with more basic plants. If this sounds extreme, consider that large and unusual trees can cost over a thousand dollars due to the time and resources it takes to produce them. Sometimes all that it takes is one look to know that a tree is worth the price.

If the landscape already has a large specimen tree, a grouping of smaller broad uprights can be used on the other side to give the landscape symmetry. This contributes balance, one of the basic elements in landscape design. In this case, a few small trees planted together have the same visual strength as a single large tree. Texture is another design element and is a good way to provide variety and interest without disrupting balance. Texture is achieved by selecting cultivars with different needle shapes and sizes. The small, compact foliage of many *Chamaecyparis*, for

example, provide a nice contrast to the stiff, sharp edges of spruce needles. Trees also come in a variety of colors from greens and blues to whites and yellows. Many green cultivars have yellow counterparts, such as *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* 'Variegata', which can be very striking. However, it is important to avoid the temptation to plant one of each as they can be overwhelming and make the landscape look like a circus. When used sparingly, blue or yellow conifers can add just the right amount of visual interest and appeal.

*Pinus koraiensis* 'Silver Ray',  
Silver Ray Korean Pine





The recurved needles of *Abies koreana* 'Silberlocke' give it an unmistakable appeal.

Large broad upright conifers such as this Hardy Cedar of Lebanon (*Cedrus libani* var. *stenocoma*) can make dramatic specimen trees.

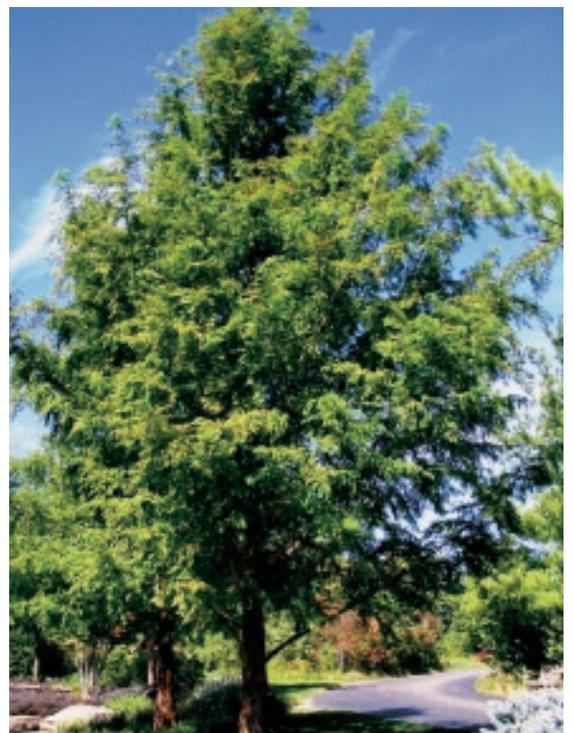


Here are some trees of various sizes, colors and textures that most sources consider broad uprights.

*Abies koreana* 'Silberlocke'. This intermediate (sometimes considered a dwarf), slow-growing Korean Fir will not go unnoticed in any landscape. The needles are waxy green, but curl upward to show off their silver undersides. The purple cones stand out in the spring. Hardy to zone 4, this species prefers moist, but well-drained acidic soil and full to partial sun. Plant it around smaller shrubs for a great accent.

*Cedrus libani* var. *stenocoma*. Cedar of Lebanon is generally hardy to zone 6, but this variety is hardy to zone 5. Because it grows over a foot per year, it requires plenty of space and will develop an open, almost columnar form at maturity and does best in full sun. The needles are green with a silver-gray tint.

*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*. For sites with poor conditions, use Dawn Redwood as an alternative to junipers or yews. This deciduous conifer is a great landscape plant and a botanical novelty. Like Ginkgo, *Metasequoia* is a 'living fossil'. The tree was only known from fossil records and thought to be extinct until scientists identified it in China in the 1940s. The dark green summer foliage turns bronze in the fall and the reddish-brown bark provides winter interest, but the tree is most striking in spring when the light green foliage begins to leaf out. It is fast-growing and is hardy to zone 5.



Dawn Redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*) is a good grower that adds a unique form and texture to the landscape.

*Pinus bungeana*. Lacebark pine is perfect for a specimen tree and even used for bonsai. As the name implies, the appeal of this tree lies mostly in the bark which is greenish with silver-white or brown patches. It is often found in urban plantings (around parking lots and in medians). Prune to eliminate weak branches as well as to provide a better view of the bark.

*Tsuga canadensis* 'Golden Splendor', Canadian Hemlock. Finding a conifer for a shady spot is always a challenge. Hemlocks such as 'Golden Splendor' can fit the bill. Although most *Tsuga canadensis* are listed as hardy to zone 4, conifer expert 'Chub' Harper advises caution when choosing a site for hemlocks. Chub notes, "Avoiding winter sun seems to be the key." Other variegated forms of *Tsuga canadensis* in the broad upright category include 'Summer Snow' and 'Lebar White Tip'.

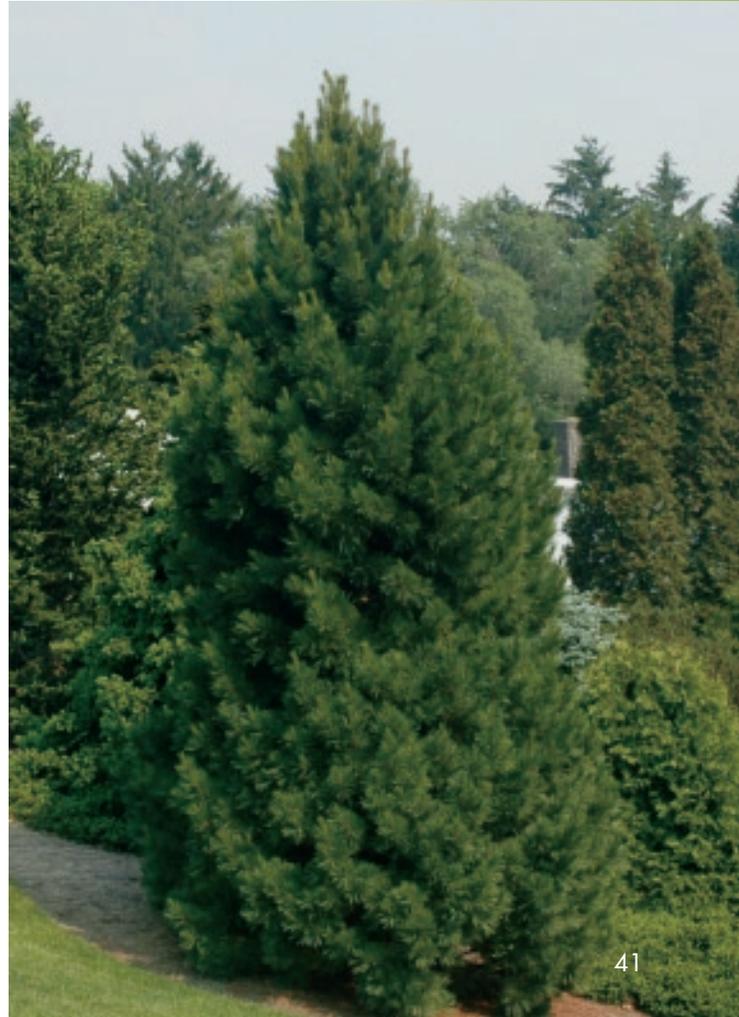
*Pinus cembra* 'Nana'. No discussion of broad uprights would be complete without *Pinus cembra*. *Pinus cembra*, either as a straight species or one of many cultivars, is a classic broad upright conifer. This handsome tree has long been a favorite of Chub Harper. Harper claims to have never met a *cembra* he didn't like and 'Nana' is no exception.



Above: *Pinus bungeana* 'Compacta' is more compact than the species, growing about one-half the rate of the species.

Bottom left: *Tsuga canadensis* 'Summer Snow' provides a broad upright alternative for part-sun to shady spots.

Bottom right: *Pinus cembra* 'Compacta Glauca'. With a tight compact form and straight central leader, it's easy to see why Chub Harper claims to have "never met a *cembra* I didn't like."





*Pinus parviflora* 'Ibo-can'.  
This silver-blue Japanese white pine is a sure show-stopper.



Ray of sunshine. The yellow-tinged needles of *Picea pungens* 'Walnut Glen' appear sunlit even on an overcast day.



This dwarf cultivar of Swiss Stone pine, is slow-growing with tightly compact blue-green needles. It is ideal for small spaces such as rock gardens and mixed borders. Hardy to zone 3.

*Pinus parviflora* 'Ibo-can'. Often listed as 'Ibokan'. Like *Pinus cembra*, many Japanese White pines fall into the broad upright category. 'Ibo-can' is just one of many interesting cultivars. Grayish-blue needles and coarse texture give this plant an understated elegance. Zone 5.

*Picea pungens*. Yes, it's the tree that we love to hate; but as with rock bands and TV shows that are ruined by commercial success, there are reasons why we liked them in the first place. For stunning blues look for 'Thompson' or 'Hoopsii'. 'Lutea' or 'Walnut Glen' add splashes of yellow. Zone 2.



True blue: *Picea pungens* 'Thompson' is among the bluest of Colorado blue spruce cultivars.



*Picea pungens* 'Lutea' offers a bright yellow take on the usual Colorado blue spruce.

*Chamaecyparis obtusa*. Pines and spruces tend to dominate the discussion of broad upright conifers, but several *Chamaecyparis*, especially *C. obtusa*, are noteworthy additions. For tight spaces or rock gardens look for dwarf forms in the 'Nana' series such as 'Nana Gracilis', 'Nana Lutea' and 'Graciosa'. Zone 5. 

*This month's Conifer Corner co-author is Wendy Klooster. Wendy is a graduate student in Horticulture at MSU and is from Gaylord, Michigan. Her favorite conifer is Tamarack (Larix laricina).*

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*Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Nana Lutea'. This dwarf form of Hinoki falsecypress adds color and character to the landscape.

## Form classes according to the American Conifer Society ([www.conifersociety.org](http://www.conifersociety.org)):

1. Globose: globe-like or rounded in general outline.
2. Pendulous: upright or mounding with varying degrees of weeping branches.
3. Narrow upright: much taller than broad; includes plants referred to as fastigate, columnar, narrowly pyramidal or narrowly conical.
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.



Working class heroes. Although much maligned for their susceptibility to *Diplodia* tip-blight, these Austrian pines (*Pinus nigra*) soldier on and provide an effective screen for homes along US-127 near East Lansing.