



Small conifers

58

DAVID HOWELLS grows trees in his small garden in the South Midlands of England. Here he discusses the charm of small and miniature conifers, their advantages and availability in the UK.

During my gardening lifetime conifers have swung in and out of fashion. In the UK it was Adrian Bloom who brought them into prominence in the 1970s, creating a famous conifer garden at Bressingham and then demonstrating how small conifers and heathers were the ideal low-maintenance, all-year planting for suburban gardens. Those ideas were very successful. Years later, however, many of his small conifers had grown bigger than intended and the gardening caravan had moved on. Now they are decidedly less in vogue and specialist suppliers find the market hard going.

I am interested in trees in general. That includes conifers, even though they are sometimes tricky to identify, even for people who are confident with deciduous trees and garden plants in general. Once I had room to grow full-sized trees. Now, with space at a premium I find that small conifers, especially the miniatures, make attractive and interesting plants. One important feature is that they give body to the garden in winter when other plants are bare or sleeping. I once went on a garden design course at Pershore College, in the Midlands where it was laid down that at least one third of the planting in a garden should be evergreen. One can debate that principle, but conifers certainly help one to put it into practice.

Small conifers can be divided into two types. There are those that grow

*Abies koreana* 'Alpine Star'*Pinus uncinata* 'Grüne Welle'

slowly but steadily and eventually become significant small trees. The best example is the basic form of *Abies koreana*, the Korean fir, which is now the most common fir seen in British gardens. *Pinus mugo*, the Alpine pine, is a genuine dwarf in the high rocky slopes of Europe but romps away in rich garden soil and mild winters. The second group are the true miniatures, plants which start small and stay small. Of course they grow each year, but very slowly indeed. They are selected forms, some of which began as witch's brooms on mature large trees.

I live in the Midlands of England within an hour or so of Ashwood Nurseries near Kidderminster, which sells a good selection of small (and not-so-small) conifers. They are bought in from a few UK suppliers but also directly from the Netherlands, home of specialist propagation. I recommend a visit. Of course some good specimens can be obtained from non-specialist nurseries, but not usually the rare and most desirable forms.

Cultivation is easy. Plant them in well-drained, relatively poor, sandy soil and give them no fertiliser.

Really small conifers, like other very small shrubs, benefit from being grown in a raised bed or a trough or in an elevated position. Some admittedly are blobs if left alone. In some cases, especially pines, they lend themselves to ornamental pruning, especially in the Japanese style. This needs confidence. The first cut is the hardest.

There are many hundreds of species and cultivars from which to choose. They include some excellent forms of *Juniperus*, *Thuja* and *Cupressus*. Faced with that array, I can only make a few selective recommendations of taxa which I have grown myself.

The many forms of *Pinus mugo* are the foundation of any collection. 'Winter Gold', as its name implies, turns a beautiful colour in winter and stands out for months. Less prominent but more interesting in shape is 'Jacobsen', while 'Picobello' has an interesting leaf form. *Pinus uncinata* 'Grüne Welle' is similar in habit. The Japanese white pine—*Pinus parviflora*—has some attractive forms, with silver grey foliage. 'Bergman' is a well-known example. Other slightly



Abies concolor 'Piggelmeem' growing in John Massey's exceptional garden in the West Midlands.

larger pines include *Pinus sylvestris* 'Frensham' and *Pinus heldreichii* 'Compact Gem'. These last two are versions of the Scots pine and the Bosnian pine.

60

Chamaecyparis—the false cypress—is associated with a range of tall trees, of which the Lawson cypress is the best known and most ubiquitous. The Hinoki cypress—*Chamaecyparis obtusa*—is slightly less common and offers a range of selected small forms. 'Nana gracilis' is small, 'Kosteri' is smaller and 'Hage' is tiny. The rich green foliage does not weep but is gathered into horizontally projecting branch systems, giving it a Japanese look.

In recent years many new forms of the Korean fir have become available. 'Icebreaker' is an outstanding new example, with silver-grey foliage that is immediately recognisable. Other good forms include 'Alpine Star'. 'Blauer Eskimo' and 'Brilliant' are good prostrate forms.

Often miniatures are the only practicable way of growing plants which are big trees in nature. I have no room for the hemlock, the Oriental spruce or the Spanish fir, at least in their common forms. But I am happy with *Tsuga sieboldii* 'Green Ball', *Picea orientalis* 'Professor Langer' and *Abies pinsapo* 'Atlas'.

Lastly, a plant which I do not possess but am keen to obtain. *Abies concolor* - the Colorado white fir—is easily recognisable because the thick blue-grey leaves curve vertically above the shoots. There are various dwarf and miniature forms of which the best is 'Piggelmeem'. This was originally a witch's broom on a specimen of *A. concolor* 'Candicans', found in a garden in Geneva. The snag is that it is almost unobtainable in the UK because it is so hard to propagate. The Dutch trade may have some specimens to offer and I am working on that basis. Once you are hooked then there is really no hope!