

The conifers

By R. W. Sidwell

The conifers are a group of primitive plants, mostly evergreen, and usually of distinct form. They are indispensable if we require strong design features in our garden plan. The term "conifer" is often loosely applied to include some allied groups such as the yews and that remarkable survival of the ancient flora, the ginkgo. Strictly speaking the all-embracing name should be "gymnosperm" — the plants with naked seeds. The true conifers, or cone-bearers, belong to the order *Coniferales* within the class *Gymnospermae* but this is being pedantic.

In choosing conifers for our gardens, it is well to ask ourselves what we want them to do, and how long we intend them to remain. It is a common practice nowadays to plant trees in places where there is no hope of their reaching maturity. I must say that I like to see trees allowed to develop to their full potential, which may mean a life upwards of 100 years. Nevertheless I will admit that a blue cedar can look very good in a small front garden for ten to 15 years. When it keeps you awake at night by scratching the bedroom window it is time for it to go. It was fun while it lasted.

Many conifers are relatively tall and narrow. The Lawson cypress in its many forms is among the most useful of these. The ordinary Lawson is fairly vigorous, making two feet of growth a year when established and slowing down after ten to 12 years. A height of 30 feet in 20 years is probably normal. The cultivar "Ellwoodii" will do about ten to 12 feet in the same time and "Fletcheri" is intermediate between the two. "Ellwoodii" is columnar in form, with almost parallel sides. The other two retain their pointed leader and narrowly conical form for many years. There are many other cultivars of Lawson cypress of varying form and colour.

Of somewhat similar form, and more vigorous on moist, heavy soils is *Thuja plicata* the Western Red cedar of the timber trade. The rich green form "Atrovirens" is exceptionally good.

Most vigorous of all conifers of this group is the very popular Leyland cypress. This regularly makes over three feet of growth a year for some years — excellent for a quick screen but often hard work to keep in check afterwards. All of the above can be clipped into formal hedges if required.

There are many conifers which naturally lose their lower branches as the years go by and may attain a considerable height without spreading too widely at ground level. Notably among these are the pines. Our native Scots pine with its dappled yellow trunk is one of our most attractive trees. When young, its lower branches will sweep the ground but it eventually turns its thoughts to higher things and the more mundane parts are jettisoned.

Where a small pine is required *Pinus mugo*, the mountain pine, may meet our needs. It eventually makes a somewhat scrubby small tree but it is a very useful thing where space is limited and the unique pine character is desired.

Many of our finest conifers were introduced from the Western USA during the early and mid-19th century through the exploration of David Douglas, William Lobb and others. The Wellingtonia (*Sequoiadendron giganteum*) with its soft spongy bark, which people cannot restrain from punching, is one of the finest of these and was widely planted in the latter half of last century. Along with the monkey puzzle it became a "must" in Victorian gardens. Related to the Wellingtonia is the redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*), the natural range of which is a narrow belt of the Pacific coast from Oregon to Monterey. One specimen, over 100m high, is claimed to be the tallest tree in the world. Evesham people will be familiar with this tree from the row in the Workman Gardens along Waterside. Both Redwood and Wellingtonia are still worth planting in the larger gardens, especially if you want to be able to locate your house from a distance. They are much more "classy" than Lombardy populars.

One of my favourite large conifers is the western hemlock (*Tsuga heterophylla*). Its fine leaves borne on low sweeping branches make it one of the most elegant trees in its early years and when mature it is a real forest giant. Unfortunately it does not seem to be happy on limey soils which would limit its planting in the Vale. The finest trees I know are on the lime free sands and clays of the West Midlands.

I said that most conifers were evergreen but we must not overlook the few that are not. The larch is, of course, the best known of these and is an important timber tree. The swamp cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) of the Florida Everglades will actually grow quite well on ordinary dry ground if the root-run is quite adequate. On wet sites it pushes its spongy hairpin-looped roots a foot or more above the ground. These are known colloquially as "knees" but in educated circles as pneumatophores. They appear to be involved in gaseous exchange with the roots — in simple terms, breathing.

Related to the taxodium is the much glamourised *Metasequoia glyptostroboides* to which the name Dawn redwood has now been given. Why we should need a popular name for a plant with so beautiful a classical name I cannot think. The name will roll off the tongue beautifully with a little practice. Once you have mastered it you will never want to say "sawn redwood" again. It was thought to be extinct until a grove was discovered in China in 1941 and introduced to England in 1948. It was found to be easy to propagate and it



Pinus radiata, the Monterey pine, at Croft Castle.

has been planted by those who like to keep abreast of fashion. There must be many thousands in the country now and it is as characteristic of the second half of the 20th century as the Wellingtonia was of the 19th.

For real glamour and survival from the distant past we must turn to the ginkgo. As I said above, this is not a conifer. It is the most unrelated tree known to man. The only species in the only genus in the only family in the order Ginkgoales puts it in a unique position. To say that it is near the conifers is true only in the sense that it is much farther away from everything else. The ginkgo is one of the

most beautiful of trees. It is of elegant form. Its fan-shaped leaves are unique and although broad in the strict physical sense could not be confused with any leaf from a "broad leaved" tree. The golden autumn colour is a bonus.

When Princess Augusta started the original planting at Kew, from which the present Royal Botanical Gardens have developed, the ginkgo was one of the first trees she planted. This was in 1762 and the tree still stands, healthy and happy after over two centuries, — the oldest ginkgo in Britain and one of the oldest in Europe.