

Cotswold Cottage Gardening Conifers for Contrast

Conifers last enjoyed real popularity in the 70s and 80s, when they were often advocated for 'low maintenance ground cover', often combined with heathers. Adopted wholeheartedly, this resulted in a rather monotonous texture and hardly sustainable on Cotswold lime soils, anyway. Since then, conifers have rather fallen from favour, overtaken by the vogue for the billowing herbaceous border, or, still more antipathetically, the new 'meadow' style. Yet I think that, particularly in small gardens, they can more than pay their way, especially when set against broad-leaved evergreens.

Go for Contrast

When thinking about using conifers, it is the texture which is perhaps the most important consideration. Too many little needles and fronds (conifer on conifer) can be very monotonous. (Heathers, of course, continue the tiny foliage theme). But this mass of small, indistinct foliage looks very good when contrasted with the big bold leaves of the laurels which I talked about in the last article or, during the summer months, the bold foliage of hostas or ligularias. In floral terms, they go well with flower spikes, such as foxgloves, or mounds of forget-me-nots or low-growing annuals.

The great recommendation for conifers is their surprising tolerance of less than ideal conditions. They will often thrive in poorer soils than many deciduous trees and shrubs, and although some of the fancier varieties prefer damp and slightly acid soil, the cedars, junipers and

cypresses will put up with dry soils and quite a bit of shade.

Low-Growing Cypresses

As garden shrubs, as opposed to trees or hedges, *Chamaecyparis* offers a good selection of relatively slow-growing but substantial bushes. *C. pisifera* 'Plumosa' starts as a broad cone until it reaches six feet, but you can easily keep it in shape and scale by a gentle clipping; there is a yellow version which looks good with daffodils in spring and then turns a more patient light-green in summer. 'Compacta' will not top 2 feet, but spreads out to at least four feet in ten years - although again you can easily keep it in check. This is a good dark grey-green, but a golden version is also available. I like these low-growing cypresses more than the prostrate junipers, because of their softer foliage; weeding around a juniper can be a very prickly experience, even through gardening gloves!

Form and Colour

Junipers, however, offer some very tight columnar forms, without taking up much room. *Juniperis communis* 'Compressa' grows to about 10 feet, and is very tolerant of poor soil and exposure; 'Stricta' has particularly good, dense foliage of grey-blue. *J. c.* 'Chinensis' grows into vertical, overlapping layers like nothing else in the garden. Conifers respond well to autumn planting, so it is not too soon to consider where you might appreciate extra form and colour in your garden this winter.

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