

Trough Gardens

By Susan Brimo-Cox

I like conifers and I have some really nice ones in my yard—Norway spruce, white pine, Colorado blue spruce. The one aspect about these mature, monster evergreens that causes me to be rather lackluster about them, however, is precisely their immense size. I can't appreciate the texture and appearance of their foliage—it's just too far up in the air.

One solution, of course, is dwarf conifers, but dwarf conifers can be difficult to define. Is a 20-foot tall conifer a dwarf? How about one that only reaches 10 feet? Are they "dwarf" because they grow more slowly, or are they truly smaller plants when mature? As it turns out, it's a little of both.

Last summer I spoke with some people from Iseli Nursery, a wholesale grower in Oregon that grows dwarf, slow-growing conifers, which it then distributes to garden centers across the United States. Oregon, I learned, is a hot bed of dwarf conifer cultivation—and some of the conifers being introduced into the consumer marketplace are little gems.

And I mean little! There are conifers for gardens of the smallest imaginable size. Some of these conifers you could plant right up against the house and not have to worry about them getting too big for decades. I'm talking about growth of only inches a year. For example, Iseli's dwarf Alberta spruce 'Jean's Dilly' takes about 10 years to reach 2-to-4 feet tall. If we were talking poodles here, these conifers would be of the miniature variety.

I like the idea that I can have conifers in my garden that are small enough to enjoy up close. Good for foundation planting? Maybe not, but they do offer opportunities for a variety of other ventures in gardening. Rock gardening, for example. How nice to have the ability to grow small alpine flowers with a conifer or two for year-round greenery, without the prospect of said conifers overrunning the place.

I'm leaning towards a different option: a trough garden.

Trough gardening got started in England in the 1920s and '30s. It was a recycling effort of sorts, using old stone watering and feeding troughs for animals as container gardens. Trough gardening became quite a fad and those old stone troughs became collectors' items. Eventually, stone troughs became scarce.

Over the past several years, I've noticed that the practice of trough gardening has re-emerged. In public



Trough gardens, like this one, are becoming increasingly popular, offering the opportunity to create miniature landscapes for patios and other outdoor spaces, using dwarf conifers and other small plants. (Photo by Susan Brimo-Cox.)

and private gardens alike, I see trough gardens showing up everywhere.

While many of us may not be able to find—let alone afford—a real stone trough, a concoction of Portland cement, peat moss, perlite and water can be easily shaped into a light-weight trough that looks very much like stone. The cement mixture is called hypertufa, and there are plenty of recipe variations available on the Internet and in magazines.

I've made small-size hypertufa containers in the past. Making a large one should be only slightly more complicated—mostly with the forming, I suppose. However, a large container of any type, so long as it has adequate holes for drainage, would serve very nicely as a home for the extremely dwarf conifers I want to grow on my patio.

Several dwarf conifer growers are making it easy to create interesting miniature conifer landscapes by packaging assorted dwarf, slow-growing conifers together. These multiple-packs of conifers are showing up at garden centers and the idea has merit; you take home a variety of conifers that have different shapes, colors and textures.

I'm looking forward to creating a miniature conifer landscape in a trough this spring. It's going to be like having Bonsai without all the clipping and training. I think I'm going to like that.

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