
The World of

CONIFERS

Matthew Olson



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Figure 1: A stand of Tamarack in late Fall.

CONIFERS ARE A UNIQUE GROUP OF PLANTS, AND MINNESOTA IS GOOD PLACE FOR THEM. There are ten species of native conifers in the state, creating many options to incorporate them into the landscape. Whether your client needs a large specimen, or a dwarf shrub, conifers provide ample opportunity to be creative.

White Pine (*Pinus strobus*) may be the most recognized conifer in Minnesota, for good reason. It can live for hundreds of years and grow over 100 feet tall, making it the largest conifer in the Midwest. The feathery needles grow in bundles of five, which is unique among our native pines. This species grows well in open spaces, away from roads where salt is used during winter. For small yards and gardens, a dwarf cultivar of this species can be used. The cultivar 'Nana' features a neat and compact habit, allowing it to be grown in landscape beds. If you're looking for adventure, the cultivar 'Pendula' is a great choice. This cultivar grows farther horizontally than vertically, often trailing along the ground in several directions.

Balsam Fir (*Abies balsamea*) is commonly grown as a Christmas tree, but it's also an



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excellent tree for Minnesota landscapes. Topping out at 50 to 70 feet tall, it's one of the few shade tolerant conifers that grow well in our climate. Balsam Fir may struggle in urban areas but performs well in locations outside of large cities. The canopy of this species stays full to the ground, allowing it to be used as a screen. This tree is native to central and northern Minnesota, preferring cool summers and cold winters. However, it can be grown throughout Minnesota. For small spaces, the cultivar 'Nana' grows only 2' tall and stays compact.

Eastern Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) is native to Minnesota, but is uncommon, only being found in the northeast part of the state. Growing to 80 feet tall, it can be recognized by its short, soft, two-sided needles. This tree performs well in Minnesota landscapes, and can tolerate shade, though it requires some sun to stay compact and full. Though rare in Minnesota forests, Hemlock can be found at many local nurseries. Over 300 cultivars of this tree are available. The Cultivar 'Summer Snow' grows only 20 feet tall and features new white growth that darkens with age. 'Moon Frost' stays compact and round, reaching only four feet tall and wide, with new white growth.

Blue Spruce (*Picea pungens*) is widely planted throughout the Midwest. However, it's susceptible to a variety of fungal diseases, often killing the trees. Many people love the blue needles that grace the new growth of these

trees. **White Fir (*Abies concolor*)** is an outstanding alternative to Blue Spruce. Featuring similar colored foliage, it creates the same beautiful effect, with lower disease risk.

Conifers are often evergreen, retaining their green leaves year-round. But some are deciduous, shedding their leaves in Fall. These trees are known as deciduous conifers. **The Tamarack (*Larix laricina*)** is Minnesota's only native deciduous conifer. A favorite of mine, it grows 40 to 80 feet, with a conical shape, like spruce and fir. It features soft needles that emerge light green in spring and darken during summer. Not only do they shed needles in fall, but they create a stunning show in the process. Often the last tree to change color, the needles turn bright gold, brightening the bogs of northern Minnesota. In the wild, they are mainly found growing in bogs, but they perform well in residential settings. They are exceptional choices for areas with wet soil, but also thrive in soil with average moisture. Several dwarf cultivars exist for this tree. 'Deborah Waxman' grows to a height of four feet, while other cultivars, such as 'Pendula' create a weeping effect.

The Tamarack may be the only tree of this type native to Minnesota, but it's not the only deciduous conifer that'll grow here. **Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*)** is gaining popularity in the Midwest. This tree is native to the southern U.S. and is found in swamps. You won't find them in the wild here, but they

are common in the south. Despite not being found here, they appear to be hardy here, with several mature trees growing in the Twin Cities. In Wisconsin, I've seen stands of this species that are over 40 feet tall, and landscapers are planting it more frequently. It's uncertain if this species is consistently hardy in the Twin Cities, but it may be worth trying to grow. The needles turn a beautiful shade of orange and red during fall. A unique feature of this tree is the knees that pop out of the ground around the base as the tree matures.

White Cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*) are often found growing in northern Minnesota. They grow slowly but can live for hundreds of years. In the wild, they have an open habit, and grow 40 feet tall. This tree is often called Arborvitae. Over 100 cultivars exist for this species, many of which are narrow and compact. These cultivars range from 3 to 40 feet tall, making this species popular for screens in the landscape. Most cultivars are dark green, but some offer unique colors, like 'Fire Chief', which has bright red growth.

Conifers are an excellent group that allow us to promote native species, while showing our creativity in the landscape.



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