

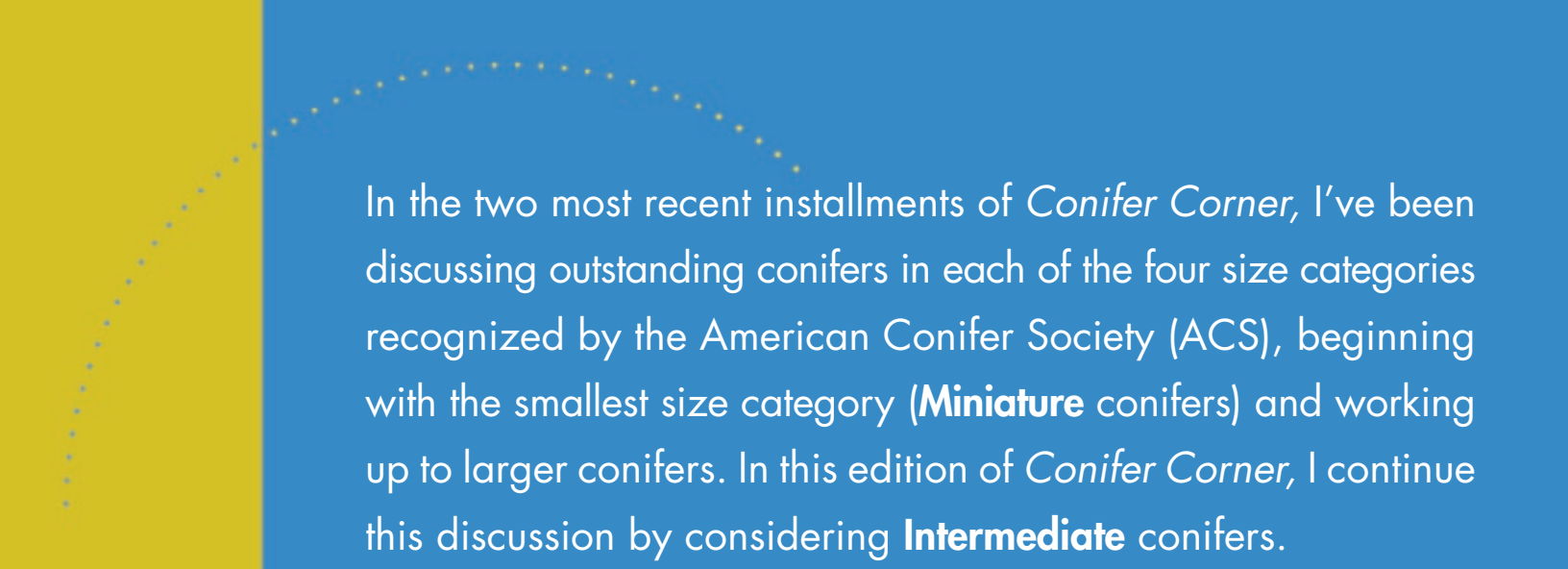


CONIFER CORNER

The Forgotten: Intermediate Conifers

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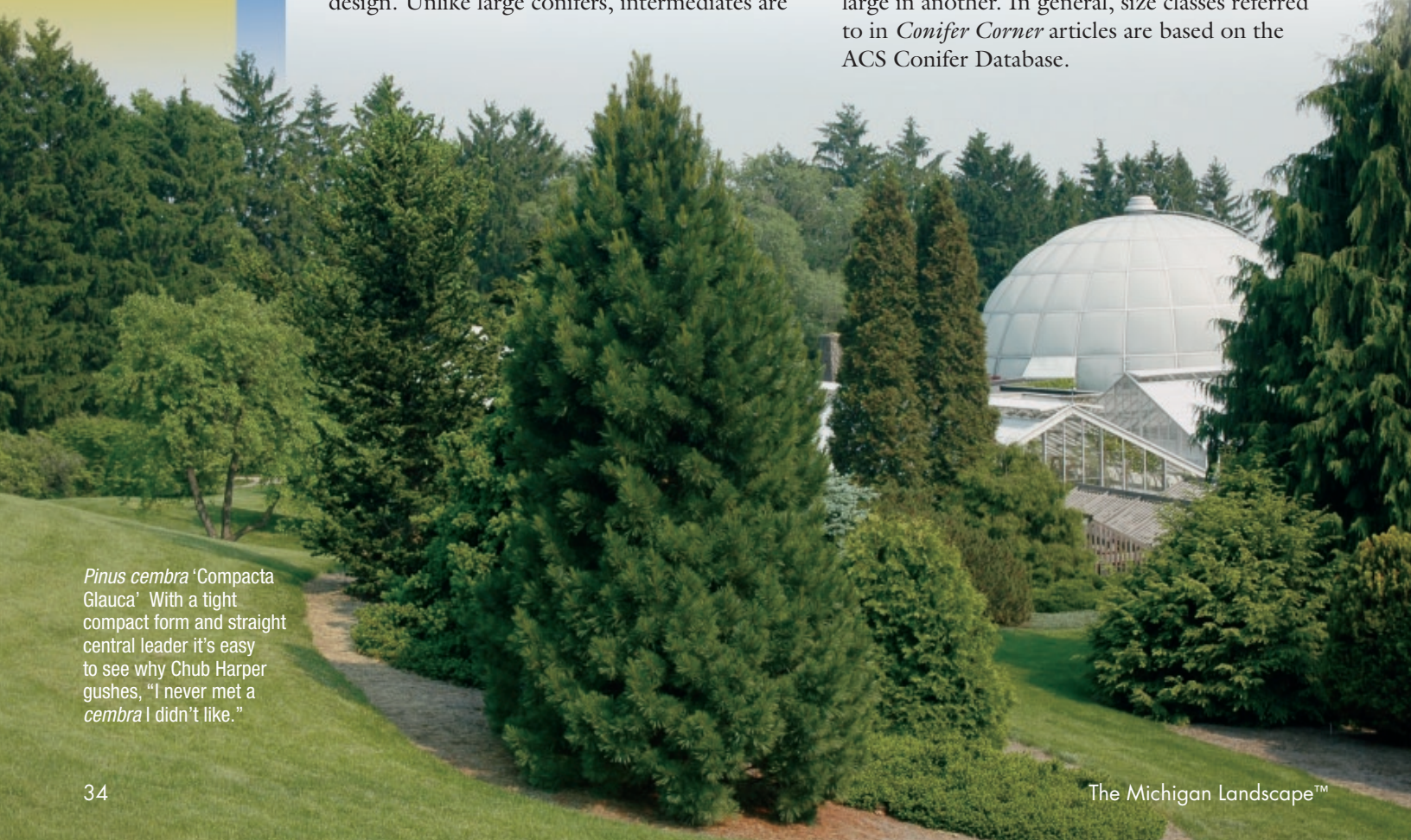


In the two most recent installments of *Conifer Corner*, I've been discussing outstanding conifers in each of the four size categories recognized by the American Conifer Society (ACS), beginning with the smallest size category (**Miniature** conifers) and working up to larger conifers. In this edition of *Conifer Corner*, I continue this discussion by considering **Intermediate** conifers.

The ACS defines Intermediate conifers as those that grow 6-12" per year and reach a height of 6' to 15' at age 10. I refer to Intermediate conifers in the title of this article as 'the forgotten conifers' because we often define Intermediates by what they are *not*. They are not adorable little miniatures or dwarfs that can fit into a container or rock garden. Conversely, Intermediates won't dominate a landscape as a specimen, like a large conifer. Nevertheless, intermediate conifers are an important group of trees because they fulfill an important function in landscape design and development. Unlike their smaller cousins, miniature and dwarf conifers, intermediate conifers are less likely to get "lost in the shuffle" in a busy landscape design. Unlike large conifers, intermediates are

less likely to interfere with power lines or other overhead obstruction and are better suited to plant closer to houses and allow greater flexibility in site selection.

As with all of the trees that I've discussed in this series on conifers in the ACS size classes, there is considerable variation in growth depending on site and cultural practices. This is especially true with intermediates. Some intermediate conifers growing on a good site could reach a size comparable to large conifers. There is no single "official" trial garden where conifer sizes are determined. Size classes are based on observations by growers and conifer enthusiasts and a given cultivar may be listed as an intermediate in one reference and as a large in another. In general, size classes referred to in *Conifer Corner* articles are based on the ACS Conifer Database.



Pinus cembra 'Compacta Glauca' With a tight compact form and straight central leader it's easy to see why Chub Harper gushes, "I never met a *cembra* I didn't like."

Here are Intermediate conifers worth considering for Michigan.

Swiss Stone pine, *Pinus cembra*. Conifer expert Chub Harper has a passion for plants that is matched by few, and few plants get him as excited as *Pinus cembra*. Just mention *Pinus cembra* and Chub goes all Will Rogers. "I've never met a *cembra* I didn't like," Chub enthuses. "This is one of those plants I just don't understand why we don't use more." Indeed, it's easy to understand Chub's swooning for Swiss Stone pine. This species maintains a tight compact form with a straight single leader, giving it a stately elegance without pruning. Moreover, *Pinus cembra* has beautiful blue green needles that often take a silvery sheen. *Cembra* is fairly tolerant of a range of sites and is variously listed as zone 3 or 4, so it is hardy in most of the Lower Peninsula. *Pinus cembra* is one of those plants that even the straight species is distinctive enough to make an impression. In addition, there are a number of cultivars on the market. Note that some of the cultivars included here fit into the Dwarf size class.

Pinus cembra 'Silver Sheen'. A striking cultivar of *P. cembra* with silvery blue needles. Zone 5.

Pinus cembra 'Chalet' is a pyramidal to upright form of *Pinus cembra*. There is a terrific specimen in the Harper Collection. Zone 4, though also reported to Zone 3.



(above) Intermediate-sized conifers like *Pinus cembra* 'Chalet' provide character without taking over a landscape.

(left) *Pinus cembra* 'Silver Sheen'. Swiss Stone pines are reliable performers in Michigan landscapes.



Japanese White pine, *Pinus parviflora* is a solid performer in Michigan. There are a variety of cultivars of Japanese White pine, some of which I've mentioned in earlier *Conifer Corners*.

Pinus parviflora 'Bergman'. This is one of the more striking forms of Japanese White pine, with twisting blue-green needles. Various listed as a dwarf or an intermediate.

Pinus parviflora 'Fukuzumi'. The form on this plant can be variable, but its recurved blue-green twisted needles give it consistent appeal.

Golden Thread falsecypress, *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera Aurea'. Yes, the Latin name is a mouthful, but this plant is a show-stopper like few others. 'Filifera Aurea' generate interest from a distance due to their bright yellow color and upright weeping form, as well as up close due to their impossibly long thread-like foliage.

(above) Striking gold. The color and texture of *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera Aurea' make it a show-stopper.

(right) Golden Thread falsecypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera Aurea') welcome visitors to the Harper Conifer Collection at Hidden Lake Gardens. Photo: Jack Wikle.



Abies concolor 'Conica' continues the theme of color – this time striking blue. *Abies concolor* 'Conica' also continues the theme of underused conifers. This tree's stately upright form makes it a prime choice as a specimen plant. Put one of these in your yard and you're guaranteed to have all of the neighbors asking "Whatzzat?".

Picea glauca 'Pendula'. Technically this is listed as an intermediate, but on better sites it may push toward the large category. Also, this cultivar has been around long enough that it's possible to find some decades-old larger specimens. The tight form and drooping branches make it easy to envision this plant in a snow-blanketed mountainside.

Abies koreana 'Silberlocke' gets double marks for showmanship. The needles on this cultivar of *Abies koreana* are highly recurved, that is, they are turned upward to reveal their silvery

underside. While that alone is enough to give the tree tremendous ornamental appeal, 'Silberlocke', like most Korean firs, also produces prodigious amounts of colorful cones. Although cones on firs make Christmas tree growers cringe, in this case it adds to the plant's landscape appeal.

Picea glauca 'Pendula' makes an elegant specimen tree.



Abies concolor 'Conica' is a striking upright form of Concolor fir that is well adapted in Michigan.



Ornamental conifer size classes recognized by the American Conifer Society

CATEGORY	GROWTH PER YEAR ¹	APPROX. SIZE AT 10 YEARS ²
Miniature	< 1"	< 1'
Dwarf	1" to 6"	1' to 6'
Intermediate	6" to 12"	>6' to 15'
Large	>12"	>15'

¹Size may vary due to cultural, climatic and geographical region

²Refers to growth in any direction

Source: American Conifer Society (www.conifersociety.org)

Corkbark fir, *Abies lasiocarpa* var. *arizonica*.

An argument for the lumpers and splitters. Some references list this as a variety or even sub-species of Subalpine fir (*A. lasiocarpa*) while others (for example, the Gymnosperm database www.conifers.org) list Corkbark fir as its own species (*A. bifolia*). In the nursery trade, var. *arizonica* holds sway. Another high elevation conifer from the mountain Southwest, Corkbark fir is a striking tree that can often match *Picea pungens* for blue color.

***Larix kaempferi* 'Pendula'**. Deciduous conifers always make a unique contribution to the landscape and this Weeping larch is no exception. This plant commands interest anytime during the growing season, but especially in the early spring when the new bright green needles are just beginning to flush. According to the ACS, this tree is widely mislabeled as *Larix decidua* 'Pendula'.

Need a break from 'blue spruce burnout'? *Abies lasiocarpa* var. *arizonica* 'Compacta' has outstanding form and color.





Walnut Glen Colorado blue spruce, *Picea pungens* 'Walnut Glen' is an interesting twist on the old standby, Colorado blue spruce. This *P. pungens* cultivar has a golden cast to its needles, which often make it look like the sun is shining on it even when it's in the shade. Reportedly adapted to a fairly wide range of site conditions though the variegated yellow needles may suffer scorch under stress.



(clockwise from top left) Bright spot. The yellow highlights of *Picea pungens* 'Walnut Glen' can brighten up even a dreary fall day in Michigan.

Larix kaempferi provides a dramatic contrast in form and color.

Deciduous conifers such as *Larix decidua* 'Julian's Weeper' provide year-round interest in the landscape.



(above) Columnar conifers such as *Thuja occidentalis* 'Degroot's Spire' are especially dramatic when grouped for effect.

(below) No need to spray... Conspicuous resin dots are characteristic of *Pinus aristata* needles, but are sometimes mistaken for pine scale.

Bristlecone pine, *Pinus aristata*. We can't really recommend bristlecone pine as an outstanding grower in Michigan, but it's a fascinating tree and it will grow on suitable sites here in Michigan. In their native habitat, Bristlecone pines are among the oldest living things on earth. The Rocky mountain form (*P. aristata*) can live to nearly 3,000 years old and specimens of the Great Basin form (*P. longaeva*) have been found that are over 4,800 years old. Although we don't expect a Bristlecone pine to live thousands of years in Michigan (and, in any case, we won't be around to see it), this makes an interesting specimen in the right spot. Look for a site with good drainage and relatively good air flow. Like many trees adapted to the arid west, these pines don't like wet feet or high humidity.


Thuja occidentalis 'Degroot's Spire'. In general, arborvitae are the kinds of plants that don't usually get people too excited. However, this upright columnar form makes a great accent and can add a formal appearance as a border or can be grouped for effect.

Thuja occidentalis 'Hetz Wintergreen'. Another upright form of arborvitae. 'Hetz Wintergreen' is noteworthy for a couple of reasons. It tends to maintain its green color throughout the winter when many other conifers turn off-color and it tends to maintain a strong central leader, whereas many columnar arbs can develop multiple leaders or bend over under snow loads. Excellent for a year-round screening hedge and windbreak.



Weeping Serbian spruce, *Picea omorika*
'Pendula Bruns'. It's always hard to go wrong with a Serbian spruce. 'Pendula Bruns' is a little slower growing and has a little tighter form than 'Pendula' and 'Berliners Weeper' — more on those two in the next *Conifer Corner*.

Black Hills spruce, *Picea glauca* 'Densata'. Depending on the reference, Black Hills spruce is listed as either a true botanical variety (var. *densata*) or simply as a cultivar. Regardless of the taxonomy, this is a versatile tree that we'll likely see more of in the future. As the Latin name 'Densata' implies, Black Hills spruce has a tight, dense growth habit and maintains a nice pyramidal form. Its growth rate is slower than

the straight species or blue spruce so it's less likely to get out of hand and provides more flexibility in site selection. With its uniform compact growth, Black Hills spruce also shows promise as a table top Christmas tree. 

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Korean pine (shown here as *Pinus koraiensis* 'Rowe Arboretum') combines adaptability, good growth, and good form into one package.

CHUB'S CHOICES

Chub Harper lists his 'top five' in each of the ACS conifer size classes.

INTERMEDIATE CONIFERS —

Growth per year: six to twelve inches.
Size at age ten years: Six to fifteen feet.

1. *Abies concolor* 'Conica', Upright Concolor fir
2. *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera Aurea', Yellow Thread Leaf false-cypress
3. *Larix kaempferi* 'Pendula', Weeping Japanese larch
4. *Pinus cembra*, Swiss Stone pine
5. *Pinus parviflora* 'Bergman', Bergman's Japanese White pine

Barking up the right tree. The passing years add even more character to conifers like this *Pinus densiflora*.

