Alternative conifers for Michigan landscapes

Consider some of these alternatives to blue spruce to increase diversity

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Colorado blue spruce has long been a favorite landscape conifer in Michigan. An on-going decline of blue spruce in many parts of Michigan, however, has caused concern among many homeowners and landscapers. When we consider the impacts of insects and diseases on other long-time favorite landscape conifers in Michigan, such as Austrian pine and Scotch pine, it’s natural to wonder, “What CAN we plant?” While the causes and potential remedies for blue spruce decline are under investigation, homeowners and landscapers looking for substitutes should consider a range of options in order to increase species diversity.

Here are eight little-used or under-used medium to large conifers that are worthy of consideration as alternatives to blue spruce.

Concolor fir

Concolor fir (or white fir) is a medium to large tree that is native to the western United States and grows 1 to 2 feet per year on good sites. Concolor fir trees have blue needles, often as blue and many blue spruces. Unlike many other firs, concolor fir can handle somewhat alkaline soils. Avoid excessively wet sites and frost pockets since concolor firs often break bud early, resulting frost damage in the spring. Hardy to USDA Hardiness Zone 4 (-30 to -20°F). Several cultivars have been selected for intense blue color, including ‘Blue cloak’ and ‘Candicans.’

Korean fir

Korean fir is another fir that grows well in Michigan and can tolerate a broader range of sites than most firs. Korean fir is an intermediate grower, about 1 foot per year. Needles are dark green with a silvery underside. Korean fir often produce copious amounts of cones and some selections have been made based on cone characteristics. USDA Zone 5 (-10 to -20°F). Cultivars include ‘Silberlock’ and ‘Blue cones.’

Alaska cypress

Alaska cypress, or Alaska yellow cedar, is a large, graceful tree that makes a wonderful specimen tree. It is a fast grower – 1 to 2 feet per year – that is native to the Cascade Mountains from Oregon to Alaska. Alaska cypress is an upright tree with weeping branches. USDA Zone 4. Several cultivars have been selected for extremely narrow, upright form including ‘Green arrow’ and ‘Strict weeping.’
**Dawn redwood Metasequoia glyptostroboides**
Dawn redwood is a deciduous conifer that adds a unique appeal to the landscape. This is a fast growing tree – 1 to 2 feet or more per year – with a tightly pyramidal growth form. Dawn redwood is native to China and was thought to be extinct until its discovery by scientists in the 1940s. The needles are soft-green and shed in the fall to reveal interesting bark patterns. USDA Zone 4. A few cultivars are available, the most noteworthy being ‘Gold rush,’ which has bright yellow foliage.

**Serbian spruce Picea omorika**
Serbian spruce has become increasingly popular in recent years. This is a large tree – 1 to 3 feet per year – with an upright, weeping form. One of the most attractive features of Serbian spruce is its blue-green needles that have silvery undersides. USDA Zone 4. Numerous selections are available in the nursery trade including upright, narrow forms like ‘Pendula bruns’ and ‘Berliner’s weeper.’

**Swiss stone pine Pinus cembra**
Swiss stone pine is an intermediate-sized (1 foot per year), upright tree. Swiss stone pine is native to central Europe and is a very reliable grower in the upper Midwest. It is in the white pine group (needles in groups of five) with striking, dark-green needles. USDA Zone 3 (-40 to -30°F). Cultivars include ‘Chalet’ and ‘Silver sheen.’

**Korean pine Pinus koraiensis**
Korean pine is also in the white pine group. In some respects, this east Asian native is reminiscent of our own eastern white pine with soft, light-green needles. Korean pine is slower-growing than eastern white pine, but will still become a large tree at maturity and tends to have a broad crown form. USDA Zone 4.

**Baldcypress Taxodium distichum**
Like dawn redwood, baldcypress is a fast-growing, deciduous conifer that grows well, even in wet sites. The two species are sometimes confused, but baldcypress has a coarser branch structure and more irregular crown than dawn redwood. Also, baldcypress foliage has an alternative arrangement, whereas dawn redwood is opposite. Although it is native to bottomlands in the southern United States, baldcypress grows well in lower Michigan and can tolerate relatively dry conditions. USDA Zone 4.

*Hardiness zones based on American Conifer Society Conifer database.*

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