



CONIFER CORNER

Weeping Wonders: Pendulous Conifers

*By Bert Cregg,
Department of Horticulture
and Department of Forestry,
Michigan State University*



This edition of *Conifer Corner* marks the eighth and final article in our series on conifer form classes recognized by the American Conifer Society (ACS). In this article, I will discuss ***Pendulous*** conifers. The ACS defines pendulous conifers as plants that are “upright or mounding with varying degrees of weeping branches”.

For many people, a graceful weeping pine or weeping spruce is the first image their minds conjure up when thinking of ornamental conifers. Pendulous conifers are among the most popular ornamental conifer forms and the ACS database recognizes over 150 different cultivars of pendulous conifers.

As with many of the ACS form designations, there is considerable overlap between the pendulous form and other forms. Weeping conifers develop when branches or a terminal leader lack strong apical dominance. If the terminal leader lacks apical dominance, the plant will become spreading rather than upright. If not staked, these forms of conifers will become prostrate or spreading. Some weeping forms of conifers maintain a central

leader and are upright, but their weeping character comes from branches that droop or are highly appressed along the main trunk.

From a design perspective, most weeping or pendulous conifers function best as accent plants. When combined with more regular forms, the graceful appearance of weeping conifers can soften edges and add an element of contrast. Therefore, the interior designer’s mantra of ‘less is more’ applies to most weeping conifers; use one here or there to provide variety. Upright forms of weeping conifers can provide an exception to this rule and can be massed for effect or used to create a visual break or barrier in the landscape.



This 'Rariflora Weeper' Norway Spruce illustrates how weeping conifers become spreading or prostrate forms if not staked.

Here are some selections
of weeping or
pendulous conifers
that merit consideration.

Weeping Larch, *Larix kaempferi* 'Pendula'

Deciduous conifers add a special flair to gardens and this one is no exception. Weeping larch is especially striking in the spring when the soft green needles first appear. *Larix kaempferi* 'Pendula' is one of the oldest conifer cultivars in the nursery trade; reportedly first introduced in 1836 in the U.K. According to the American Conifer Society, this plant has been mislabeled in many commercial conifer lists in the U.S. The plants that are currently sold in the trade in the U.S. have been identified and are *Larix kaempferi* 'Pendula' and not *Larix decidua* 'Pendula'.

Angel Falls White Pine, *Pinus strobus* 'Angel Falls'

This introduction from Iseli Nursery in Boring, Oregon offers a slightly different take on the usual weeping White pine (*Pinus strobus* 'Pendula'). 'Angel Falls' is slower growing and denser than 'Pendula', ultimately forming a dense mound.

Snake Branch Spruce, *Picea abies* 'Virgata'

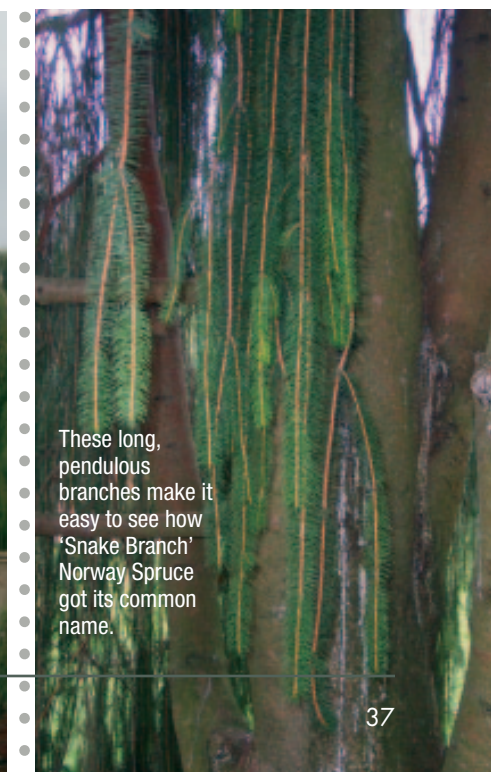
The common name 'Snake Branch' spruce says it all about this unique tree. This is one that is certainly not for everyone. *Picea abies* 'Virgata' is a large tree that forms a more or less dominant central leader. Lower branches form long, drooping shoots without side branches giving the tree its distinctive 'snake-like' appearance.



Weeping Japanese Larch provides contrasts in texture and color.



'Angel Falls' White Pine makes a graceful specimen plant.



These long, pendulous branches make it easy to see how 'Snake Branch' Norway Spruce got its common name.




Weeping Serbian Spruce, *Picea omorika*

Serbian spruce is one of the great all-around conifers for Michigan. It's a good grower, tolerates a range of sites, and has striking silvery-green needles. *Picea omorika* is a natural choice when discussing weeping conifers because even the straight species has a drooping branch habit. Several noteworthy weeping cultivars of *Picea omorika* are available in the trade. 'Berliner's Weeper' is a large tree with pendulous branches that are upturned to show their silvery underside. Two of the most common weeping forms of Serbian spruce are 'Pendula' and 'Pendula

Bruns'. These cultivars both have narrow crowns, but the branches of 'Pendula Bruns' are even more compact than 'Pendula'.

Weeping Norway Spruce, *Picea abies* 'Pendula'

Picea abies 'Pendula' is one of the most popular weeping conifers. The growth habit varies depending on training in the nursery. Trees that are staked droop down to form a cascade of branches; whereas, plants that are grafted low and not staked essentially become a prostrate, ground-hugging form. Look for bright purplish-pink cones in the spring.



Cones can add an element of interest in the spring to Weeping Norway Spruce.

On the straight and narrow... Pendula Bruns Serbian Spruce makes a striking accent in gardens throughout Europe and the U.S.

Weeping Nootka Falsecypress, *Chamaecyparis (Xanthocyparis)* *nootkatensis* 'Pendula'

Perhaps the epitome of weeping conifers. Usually described with adjectives like 'stately', 'graceful', and 'elegant'. Like Serbian spruce, Nootka falsecypress has a weeping branch habit even as a straight species. Over the years, conifer propagators have developed selections to accentuate this trait even further. 'Pendula' is the most common weeping form and is an outstanding large specimen tree. Additional weeping forms of *Chamaecyparis (Xanthocyparis) nootkatensis* include: 'Strict Weeping' (tall, narrow tree with branches hanging directly down against the trunk); 'Jubilee' (narrow weeping form with a spire-like trunk); 'Glaucua Pendula' (blue-green weeping form). Note: As noted in earlier *Conifer Corner* articles, taxonomists have reclassified *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* as *Xanthocyparis nootkatensis* following discovery of a related conifer in Vietnam. The new scientific name will eventually take hold. Presently, however, the species is often referred to as *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* — even in many peer-reviewed scientific papers.

Weeping Japanese Red Pine, *Pinus densiflora* 'Pendula'

This is a plant with character to spare. Weeping Japanese red pine has no apical dominance and will form a prostrate mat without staking. When

staked it forms an undulating cascade of branches and continues to develop more character with age.



Weeping Nootka Falsecypress (center) makes a dramatic tree in any landscape.

- *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* 'Strict Weeping' is a narrow form of Nootka Falsecypress.



This Weeping Japanese Red Pine shows the character born of age.

Weeping Baldcypress, *Taxodium distichum* 'Pendens'

Want a plant with some appeal for a wet or low spot? *Taxodium distichum* 'Pendens' provides year-round interest; weeping branch habit, soft green needles in the spring, russet-red fall color, and striking bark texture. Truly a plant for all seasons. Note that this is a large tree so be sure to give it room to grow.

Weeping Hemlock, *Tsuga canadensis* 'Pendula'

Here's another weeping form for a specific site. Weeping hemlock adds a graceful element to shady areas. As with most hemlocks in the Upper Midwest, the key to success is proper site selection. Look for spots that are well-drained, but not too dry and avoid winter sun. 'Pendula' and related weepers such as 'Sargentii' are classified as large conifers and will need some space to grow. For a weeping habit in a smaller hemlock consider dwarfs such as 'Jeddeloh' or 'Brookline'.

Dr. Bert Cregg is an Associate Professor in the Departments of Horticulture and Forestry at MSU. He conducts research and extension programs on management and physiology of trees in landscape, nursery, and Christmas tree systems.

All photos used in this article are used by permission of Bert Cregg and may not be reused in any way without express written permission.

Form classes according to the American Conifer Society (www.conifersociety.org):

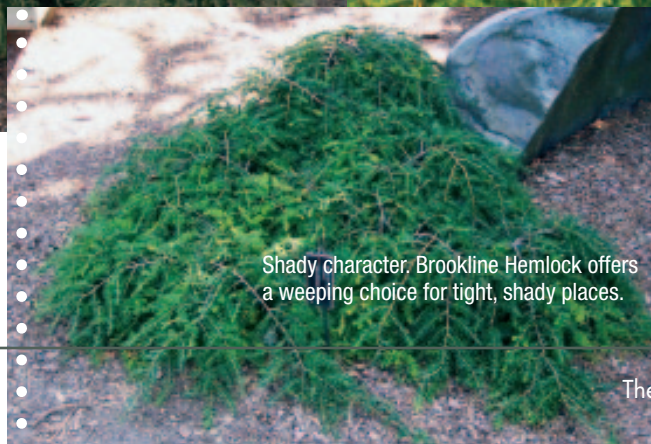
1. Globose: globe-like or rounded in general outline.
2. Pendulous: upright or mounding with varying degrees of weeping branches.
3. Narrow upright: much taller than broad; includes plants referred to as fastigate, columnar, narrowly pyramidal or narrowly conical.
4. Broad upright: includes all other upright plants that do not fit into categories 1-3.
5. Prostrate: ground-hugging, carpeting plants without an inclination to grow upward.
6. Spreading: wider than tall.
7. Irregular: erratic growth pattern.
8. Culturally altered: pruned or trained into formal or imaginative shapes, such as high grafts or standards.



Weeping Hemlock provides a graceful garden accent.



Sargentii Canadian Hemlock is a large conifer and needs space to grow.



Shady character. Brookline Hemlock offers a weeping choice for tight, shady places.

A new flush of spring growth shows just one season of interest for Weeping Baldcypress.