

Taking Another Look . . . Using Evergreen Trees, Shrubs and Ground Covers to Add Year-Round Interest to Your Landscape

When most people hear the word *evergreen*, they think of a Christmas tree. However, evergreen really refers to any plant — a tree, a shrub or ground cover — that keeps the color in its needles or leaves all year long. It's easy to see where the name evergreen comes from! In contrast, *deciduous* plants lose their leaves once a year in the fall and survive winters by becoming dormant (inactive) until spring — like maple trees, for example.

Whether considering evergreen trees, shrubs or ground covers, evergreen plants can be divided into two broad categories:



Evergreens with needles

Common examples: Pine, spruce, juniper, fir and yew



Evergreens with leaves

Called *broad-leaved* evergreens

Common examples: Boxwood, holly, azaleas, rhododendrons, euonymus and English ivy

Four good reasons to include evergreen plants in the landscape

1. Add life to the winter landscape. It's easy to love evergreens because they stay green and alive in winter when everything else seems to close down. They add interest to an otherwise weary view and form the mainstay of the landscape during the winter months. Colorful berries, bark, and foliage carry on the show long after summer and fall blooms fade.

2. Variety in size, shape, color and texture. Evergreen plants range in size from ground-hugging plants growing only a few inches tall to large trees.

They come in all shapes — flat, horizontal, pyramid, rounded, narrow, broad, irregular, and even contorted. And if you don't like a plant's natural shape, there's always pruning.

Foliage color ranges from all shades of green, gray-green and blue-green, as well as gold, yellow, cream, purple and red. Check out the new growth on evergreen plants in the springtime. The light shades of new growth contrasted against the darker older foliage are beautiful.

3. Protection for birds. Evergreen trees, such as pines, spruces, and junipers, provide the essential hiding places that birds need for building nests and for shelter from winter winds.

4. Low maintenance and longevity. Once established, many evergreen plants require little maintenance and flourish for years.



Have you thought about these ways to use evergreen plants?

Accent and contrast.

- Mix evergreen shrubs such as azaleas, rhododendrons, dwarf pines and yews with annuals and perennials in a border. In winter, when the annuals and perennials have died back, the shrubs become the focal point of the bed.
- Intensify the beauty of evergreen trees and shrubs by planting a mixture together. The contrast in color, height, shape and texture accentuates their individual beauty.
- Use evergreen shrubs to create a great background for a flower bed. Boxwood, holly and others make your flowers more vibrant against the green foliage. And as a bonus, the evergreens provide a framework in winter.
- Use the strong silhouettes of conifers to accent a corner of a garden bed or frame a doorway.

Screening. Plant evergreen shrubs and trees:

- Along the house and driveway to add beauty, define lot lines and add separation from the folks next door.
- For screening eyesores or to soften a wall.
- To discourage animals and people from cutting through your yard.
- For a noise buffer.
- For a stalwart hedge or windbreak. A screen of evergreens that protects your house from winter winds will also help reduce heating bills.

TIP: When creating screens with evergreens, don't forget to consider the ultimate plant heights and widths so they won't outgrow their setting.

Small gardens. Use dwarf conifers for small gardens or a hillside or rock garden. They are ideal and require little maintenance.

Evergreen ground covers. They can be used:

- For spots where grass will not grow or would be difficult to maintain — such as shady areas under trees or next to buildings where tree roots grow close to the surface.
- For steep banks or slopes. Their strong, spreading roots quickly grasp and hold the soil. Year-round foliage also helps to soften the impact of rain and provides excellent soil erosion control.
- To unite elements of the landscape, such as transitioning from one area to another.



Growing Tips

Each plant's growing and planting requirements will differ, so follow the instructions on the plant's tag. However, here are a few tips that apply to most evergreen plants.

Planting zone. Although many factors influence an evergreen's chance for survival, the most dependable indicator is its hardiness, that is, the lowest temperature it can endure. In the Kansas City area, we are in Zone 6a, which has an average winter low of - 5° to - 10° F. Avoid purchasing plants that are not rated for Zone 6a.

Planting time. Spring or fall is the best time to plant most evergreens.

Lighting Requirements. Most evergreen trees perform best in full sun or at least 6 hours of sun per day. Evergreen shrubs have more variable requirements, with some needing full sun and others requiring only

partial sun. Careful consideration is necessary for specific lighting requirements of the different evergreen shrubs. (Check the plant label.) For part sun plants it is best to avoid the hot afternoon sun.

Planting.


1. Evergreens need well-drained soil to survive. Most are easily killed by water standing at their roots. To check for adequate drainage, dig the planting hole in advance and fill it with water. If all the water drains out in the first 18 to 24 hours, drainage is satisfactory.
2. After positioning the plant properly (avoid planting too deeply), always reuse the soil removed from the planting hole . . . no matter how bad it looks. Replacing this soil with soil of a different type can often lead to water problems. Do, however, add organic matter to the soil, such as peat moss or compost. Mix about one part organic matter to two parts soil.
3. Make a basic catch for water by creating a raised circle of soil 2 to 3 inches high about a foot away from the plant.
4. Mulch. It conserves moisture, wards off weeds and insulates the soil in winter. Place a 3- to 4-inch layer of mulch (such as straw, wood chips or leaves) beneath the spread of branches, *but keep the mulch away from the base of the plant*. Direct contact causes stem rot and encourages rodents and insects.

Water.

- Give top priority to watering newly planted evergreens. If rainfall is low the first season, saturate the soil at least once a week with a light trickle from a garden or soaker hose.
- Every year, prepare the plants for winter. If the summer or fall has been dry, thoroughly soak the area around the plants in late November so plants go into winter with an adequate moisture supply. Winter drying is a common cause of plant death.

Fertilizing.

- **DO NOT** fertilize at planting time; it may injure new roots.
- **DO NOT** fertilize during the first growing season.
- After the plant has had a growing season to become established, fertilize only in the spring, just as new growth appears. (Fertilizing in the summer or fall encourages late season growth and makes the plant susceptible to winter injury.) Use a time-release fertilizer for gradual feeding that lasts many weeks. Any evergreen tree and shrub fertilizer is a good choice for most evergreens.

 Evergreen plants that do well in Johnson County

When you pick plants that do well in our climate, they will grow better and you'll have less care.

| Type | Variety | Comment |
|---|---|---|
| Needed evergreen trees and shrubs | | |
| Arborvitae | Degroot's Spire' | Tolerant of temperature extremes, prefers more evenly moist soils; can tolerate some dry conditions; full sun to light shade; use a specimen, accent screen or hedge. Height 1015' spread 2-3'. |
| Fir | White | Full sun to light shade. Best fir for the Midwest. Needs moist soil and wind protection. Similar in appearance to the Colorado Blue spruce. Height 30-40', spread 15-20'. |
| Hemlock | Canada | Good drainage, cool, acidic soils and adequate moisture essential. Prone to sun scorch and drought injury. Requires protection from wind. |
| Juniper Full sun. Hundreds of varieties to choose from. Withstands hot, dry, poor soils better than other evergreens. Comes in all sizes and shapes. Tough and sturdy. Prunes well. | Spreading junipers | |
| | Armstrong | Dwarf spreader with bright green foliage. Height: 3-4'. |
| | Compact Pfitzer | Tight, dense spreader. Height: 3-4'. |
| | Old Gold | Outstanding golden color. Height: 3-4'. |
| | Upright junipers | |
| | Canaerti | Pyramid-shaped growth. Heavy set of small whitish-blue berries. Height: 15-20'. |
| | Chinensis varieties | Many different kinds of plants with differing heights. |
| | Eastern Redcedar | Native to Kansas. Very tolerant plant. Excellent cover and food source for birds. Height: 30-40'. |
| | Keteleeri | Pyramid-shaped growth. Vigorous grower. Produces an abundance of blue colored berries. Foliage is dull to dark green throughout the seasons. |
| Pine Full sun. | Vanderwolf | Upright, vigorous, pyramidal growth habit. Soft, blue-green, twisted needles. Height: 20-30' Spread: 10-15' |
| | Eastern White | Soft, bright needles. Excellent plant. Height 60-70', spread 20-30'. |
| | Mugo | A great shrub that is usually wider than tall with a dense, rounded growth pattern. Height of most varieties ranges from 2 - 8 feet |
| Spruce Full sun to light shade. Does not tolerate prolonged drought. | Colorado Blue | Strong accent plant. Unusual blue-grey color. Slow grower. Height 30-40', spread 15-20'. |
| | Black Hills | Very hardy. Compact and slow growing. Dense green to bluish-green foliage. Height 20-40'. |
| | Dwarf Alberta | Novelty plant. Shapes up like a perfect miniature Christmas tree. Bright green, dense foliage. Very slow growth. Seldom exceeds 4 to 5 feet. |
| | Norway | Fast growing, wind resistant, with attractive, drooping branches. Produces large cones (4 - 6 inches). Height 50-60', spread 20-30'. |
| Yew | Plant in partial shade or shade. Trouble-free evergreen with many different kinds of plants with differing heights and spreads. | |
| Broad-leaved evergreen shrubs (shrubs with leaves) | | |
| Azalea | Girard Hybrids | Full sun or light shade. Plant on the north or east side for protection against the hot wind. Very hardy with large flowers. Foliage turns reddish in late fall. Height 3-4', spread 3-4'. |

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| Type | Variety | Comment |
|---|--|--|
| Boxwood Sun to light shade. Excellent for formal hedges and borders. | Green Velvet | Dark green leaves. Height 3-4', spread 3'. |
| | Korean | Extremely hardy, small-leaved form. Leaf color varies from light green to rich deep velvety green. Several good varieties available. Height: 3-4' Spread: 3-4' |
| Holly | Inkberry | Full sun to part shade. Requires both male and female plants to produce berries. One of the toughest for our area. Height 3-4', spread 3-4'. |
| | Meserve | Shade to partial shade. Very hardy. Berries are shiny deep red. Requires both male and female plants to produce berries. Height 4-5', spread 4-5'. |
| Rhododendron Part shade. | Catawba | Very hardy with large leathery leaves. Height 4-6', spread 4-6'. |
| | P. J. M. | Very hardy with small leaves that turn plum-purple in fall. Height 3-5', spread 3-5'. |
| Broad-leaved evergreen ground covers | | |
| Euonymus | Wintercreeper | Full sun or partial shade. Leaves change from green to a plum-purple in |
| Ivy | English ivy | Needs a shady location. Very hardy evergreen vine and ground cover. |
| Vinca | Vinca Minor | Semi-evergreen. Needs a shady location. Very hardy and vigorous spreader. Shiny, dark foliage with blue flowers in spring. |
| Needled evergreen ground covers | | |
| Juniper Full sun. | Many different kinds of plants with differing spreads, densities and colors. | |

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