

Uncommon Evergreens

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This article is about uncommon evergreen trees for eastern Nebraska. That's a bit of a misnomer, however, since in reality almost all evergreens in this area are unusual. The only evergreen actually native to the region is the eastern redcedar (*Juniperus virginiana*). And even it was fairly uncommon at the time of Nebraska's settlement. There were no pines or firs or spruce. The closest native evergreens other than cedar were the ponderosa pines of Custer County or the white pines of northeastern Iowa.

Eastern Nebraska was part of the central prairie region where trees, especially evergreens, just couldn't compete against climatic extremes and fairly regular prairie fires. But the region was eventually settled and, over the last 15 decades, people have been planting a wide variety of evergreen trees on their farms and in their communities. Fast forward to today and there are now millions of evergreen trees growing in the area. This includes some fairly common types such as ponderosa pine, Scotch pine, Austrian pine, white pine, Colorado spruce, Norway spruce and white fir. And of course, without the threat of prairie fire, the native redcedar has exploded in population just about anywhere birds are able to deposit its seeds, including in both grasslands and woodlands.

For a variety of reasons, some of our more common evergreens have struggled mightily in recent years. Diseases, including pine wilt, have killed millions of Scotch and Austrian pines. And recent severe droughts and high temperatures have combined to kill many other species that are native to cooler latitudes or elevations such as white pine, Norway spruce and Colorado spruce. In reality our Great Plains climate, combined with certain diseases and insects, makes it hard for many evergreens to thrive here and the likelihood of even higher future temperatures isn't going to help. But it's also true that at least 50 different species of evergreens can be found growing in our region, including a wide variety of pine, fir, spruce, juniper/cedar, arborvitae, falsecypress and yew.

For those looking to plant evergreens it would be wise to consider planting some of the more uncommon species to help give diversity to our windbreaks and community forests. Here are just a few to consider:

- **Bosnian Pine** is an attractively dark green pine that is compact and somewhat slow-growing but which has proven adaptable to a variety of sites and conditions. It tolerates slightly wetter soils than other pines. It will grow up to 40 feet high and 25 feet wide, but will take a long time to get there.
- **Domingo Pine** is a hybrid between American and Mexican white pine species, thus giving it more heat and drought tolerance than other white pines. It is new to our area but worth a look and will likely grow 50-60 feet high and up to 30 feet wide.
- **Korean Pine** is a soft-needled pine with a large edible nut. It is relatively new to the region but some specimens are at least 30-40 years old and have reached nearly 50 feet high.
- **Limber Pine (in photo)** is a Rocky Mountain species of higher elevations, but some native stands occur at lower elevations on the western High Plains. It is extremely drought-tolerant and should be sited only on well-drained soils. It is relatively slow-growing and can reach up to 50 feet high and 30 feet wide.
- **Southwestern White Pine** is a cousin of limber pine native to the southwestern United States. It shows greater tolerance to heat and drought and thus may be better adapted to a hotter and drier future in this area. It will grow 50-60 feet high and 30 feet wide.
- **Meyer Spruce** has a distinctive bluish color and is similar in appearance and growth habit to Colorado spruce. It is considered to be more tolerant of wetter soils than other spruces, but is still best sited on well-drained soils. It will eventually grow up to 70 feet high and 30 feet wide.