

'Yoshino': An Outstanding Cultivar of the Japanese Cedar

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Hundreds of exceptional conifers exist, but one among them stands out: a plant that combines great beauty and diversity of form with ease of propagation and tough adaptability. I refer to *Cryptomeria japonica*, or Japanese cedar.

Japanese cedar is a monotypic genus native to Japan and southern China. In Japan, it has been grown and selected for hundreds of years as an important forestry crop, a valuable ornamental, and a bonsai subject. Revered plantings of Japanese cedar, or *sugi*, surround several of the oldest monastery temples. Many of them are over 300 years old and reach well over 100 feet in height, with trunk diameters of 10 feet. But these massive trees bear little resemblance to the average Japanese cedar on this continent. Nor are these venerable specimens similar to the Japanese cedars often seen languishing in established landscapes. In North America the oldest specimens are usually seedlings that have aged into thinning, gangly individuals. They do not represent the handsome forms now available, and unfortunately, they have given Japanese cedar an undeserved reputation for tattiness.

The "classic" Japanese cedar, *Cryptomeria japonica* var. *japonica*, takes on a loosely conical, semiformal shape and can reach heights of 50 to 80 feet. The short, flexible, somewhat incurved needles give the foliage a soft, refined appearance and an easily handled texture. (Most people begin unconsciously stroking the branches of Japanese cedar within minutes of standing next to it.) As it matures, *C. japonica* var. *japonica* and related types (including 'Yoshino') resemble tightly knit, forest-green clouds billowing up from the ground. However, this characteristic varies greatly among its many cultivars, which differ so much from one to another that they hardly seem to be the same species.

Japanese cedar is hardy throughout zones 6 to 9—even in mountainous areas and hot

regions of the eastern coastal plain and piedmont. It prefers a rich, deep, acidic soil, but it has performed well in many soil types throughout the country. One of its great attributes is its range of adaptability, extending from the cool, moist Northwest to the hot, wet Southeast. It prefers higher soil moisture than many other conifers and suffers during extended dry periods. Its root system is a vigorous, fibrous mass, and even large trees transplant readily with minimal browning and dieback if adequate water is regularly provided following transplanting.

Like almost all conifers, Japanese cedar needs full sun for rapid growth, but it also grows well in partial shade. Deep or constant shade, however, will lead to thinning and interior dieback. Avoid planting Japanese cedars in exceptionally windy sites, too, especially in borderline cold-hardiness areas where excessive winter bronzing may be a problem. Partial shade will minimize winter bronzing.

Japanese cedar is a problem-free plant with one exception: Stressed plants can be susceptible to the fungus *Phyllosticta aurea* (redfire). It causes foliage to die and branches to turn a bright reddish brown. It generally attacks older foliage on individual branches first, then—in severe cases—progresses throughout the tree until only the actively growing tips remain green. However, susceptibility is highly variable among cultivars, and 'Yoshino' is one of the most resistant.

Cold can be another of Japanese cedar's adversaries. From time to time, late spring freezes—or fall freezes on actively growing, unhardened imported plants—will kill the soft tip growth of the branches. Happily, this is never serious because it has a wonderful ability to regrow after dieback or cutback. (I have seen a 4-foot-tall plant of 'Benjamin Franklin' reduced to 4 inches by a large mower twice in three months; the unrepentant operator of the mower dubbed

it "the bionic plant.") Frost or freeze damage to soft tip growth is easily differentiated from the symptoms of redfire fungus. Redfire usually progresses from older to younger tissue along a branch and up the tree. Insects are seldom a problem. Since bagworms, which plague Leyland cypress in some areas, are not normally a pest of *Cryptomeria*, the full-size forms of Japanese cedar make an excellent alternative to Leyland cypress.

Almost all forms of Japanese cedar can be propagated easily from cuttings, which are best taken from November through February but will root at almost any time of year if mature, hardened wood is available. Full-size cultivars like 'Yoshino' will usually root even if no visible mature wood is available (albeit more slowly), but avoid cutting during active flushes of growth. Wound cuttings minimally and treat them with moderate concentration of rooting hormones and place them under mist. (In winter, bottom heat can help.) As one might expect in a hydrophilic plant, it roots faster at higher mist frequencies than those used for other conifers.

The cultivar 'Yoshino' is a full-sized form that will reach 50 feet quite rapidly and retain a uniform, informally pyramidal habit with the type species' cloudlike silhouette. It is the most reliably cold-hardy cultivar and the best choice for zone 6 gardens. A beauty as a specimen, in numbers it will also rapidly make a handsome screen. 'Yoshino' has been used to create a lush background to the waterfall and mountain paths of Tenshin-en, the Japanese garden at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.

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