

ALONE OR IN COMBINATION PLANTINGS, YEWS COMPLEMENT LANDSCAPE WELL

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The yew (*Taxus*), one of the finest narrow-leaf evergreens for use in the landscape, has a long history. *Taxus* fossils have been found between layers of sandstone and shale, originating in the Jurassic Period (plus or minus 150 million years ago). Records show yew foliage was used as a poison during Caesar's time. The English Yew (*Taxus baccata*) is the patriarch of European trees. It is native to the British Isles, growing best in the alkaline soils which are deep, fertile, and well-drained.

In England, the Yew has long been associated with religion. During the Druidic Period, the yew was a sacred tree, believed to be a symbol of long life and/or immortality. Early Christian churches were built in yew groves (Fountains Abbey, Yorkshire). In most English churchyards, one can find the yew — a symbolic link to immortality.

Yew wood is extremely hard and durable. It is tough enough to be used as cogs in a mill, on cart

wheels, and cabinets. During medieval times, it was a medium for warfare, being a part of the finest bows and arrows. Today, furniture makers use yew wood for fine quality pieces.

There is much controversy about how many species of *Taxus* exist. There are three species somewhat universally accepted — English Yew (*Taxus baccata*), Canadian Yew (*Taxus canadensis*), and Japanese Yew (*Taxus cuspidata*).

English Yew (*T. baccata*) is completely hardy as far north as New York City and a few varieties are hardy into the Boston area. This plant reaches 30 to 60 feet in height, growing as broad as tall, and best suited for partially shaded areas. The hardiest of the English Yews is *T. baccata* 'Repandens' which was developed in the United States. This prostrate growing plant reaches 20 feet in width and 5 feet in height. It makes a wonderful ground cover.

Canadian Yew (*T. canadensis*) is a native species reaching 3 to 4 feet in height. Its native growing range is from Virginia to the Great Lakes Forest. It will tolerate shade and has light, pale green foliage. The only hybrid grown in the trade today for use in the landscape is *X T. hunnewelliana* — a cross chance of *T. canadensis* and *T. cuspidata*.

Japanese Yew (*T. cuspidata*) was brought from Japan to the United States in the late 1860's by Dr. Gordon Hall. This plant often reaches 60 feet in height and is extremely hardy. Cultivars used in the United States are hybrids — crosses between *T. cuspidata* and *T. baccata*, called Anglojapanese Yew (*X T. media*). The Anglojapanese Yew cultivar is the hardiest and most versatile group of yews that has adapted to conditions through the Midwest



Trimmed correctly, this *Taxus media* 'Brownii' (left) makes an attractive hedge in a landscape. It is the hardiest and most versatile cultivar of yews that has adapted to conditions through the Midwest and Northern U.S.

A nearly prostrate yew with bluish-green leaves, the *Taxus baccata* 'Repandens' grows to 20 feet wide and five feet high. 'Repandens' is the hardiest of English yews and makes a wonderful ground cover.



and Northern U.S. A few of the common varieties grown in the trade which display good growth characteristics include 'Chadwick', 'Browni', 'Densiformis', 'Flemer', 'Ward', 'Ohio Globe', 'Costich', 'Hatfield', 'Hick's' and 'Fairview'. A close look at some of these varieties will show their adaptability to shade or sun, hardiness of continental winters, and their great variation in form, ranging from 5 to 40 feet in height and 8 to 25 feet in width. For many years, yews couldn't be grown in the Midwest, due to the continental climate. With the development of the Anglojapanese Yew cultivars and the hardiness bred in the plants from the Japanese Yews, yews became a regal Midwestern plant.

'Chadwick' Yew is a low-spreading type, reaching 3 to 5 feet in height. It has rich dark-green foliage and doesn't break down when grown in areas of heavy snow.

'Brown' Yew is a plant reaching 6 feet in height and 10 feet in width with a round habit. This plant has rich dark-green foliage year-round but winterburns if exposed to southwest dry winds or sun. 'Brown' was one of the best yews developed by horticulturist T.D. Hatfield.

X *Taxus media* 'Densiformis' has a loose habit of growth, reaching 6 to 8 feet in height and 18 feet in width. This plant must be pruned or it will break apart under the weight of heavy snow.

'Ward's' Yew is in common use throughout the Midwest. If unpruned, it will reach 6 feet in height and 25 feet in width. This plant must be pruned heavily to avoid snow injury and become extremely resistant to desiccation (winterburn).

'Ohio Globe' is a round plant reaching 10 feet in height and width. It grows well in exposed or shady areas, rarely winterburns, and is an exciting blue-green year-round.

'Costich' is a columnar yew reaching 15 feet in height. It is difficult to find in the trade but grows well under Midwest conditions. It requires little pruning, is strong, and doesn't break under the weight of even the heaviest snow, while rarely winterburning.

'Hatfield' Yew is the tallest of the yews developed by Hatfield at the Honeywell Estate. It has a pyramidal habit of growth reaching 30 feet in height. During the past twenty years, this plant has shown little damage due to desiccation or mechanical injury. This tree-like yew fits into many areas, e.g., foundation plantings around public buildings or two-story homes.

When selecting yews for the home landscape, one of these Anglojapanese cultivars is perfectly hardy from Kansas City to Boston, throughout the Northeast as well as Midwest. Once the correct variety is chosen, understanding the insects, diseases, and maintenance requirements makes yew an outstanding addition to the landscape. Everyone should visit the Ohio Research and Development Center to view the *Taxus* collection started by L.C. Chadwick. Here one can observe the unpruned habit and landscape height of many yew cultivars.

Yews should be planted in slightly alkaline, well-drained, fertile soils, preferably in the spring. The pH should range from 6.5 to 7.5. A sandy, well-drained loam high in organic matter is optimal. Yews are often considered slow-growing plants

but, if grown in fertile soils and fertilized annually with the equivalent of 10 to 15 pounds of 12-4-8 per 1,000 square feet, they regularly will grow 10 to 20 inches in height per year. Clay or poorly-drained soils often result in decreased growth and even death (root rot).

When selecting a site, one should remember yews are shade-loving plants. They will grow best in a north to northeast side of a building or as an understory plant. Many yews burn severely (desiccate during the winter) if exposed to south or southwest winds. (Check above varieties for tolerance to sun and southwest winds.) If one has a specimen plant exposed to southern winds, it should be sprayed with an anti-desiccant or, more effectively, wrapped in late November with burlap to reduce water loss.

Pruning is important to remove weak, diseased, or dead branches and shape where desirable. Yews should be pruned in mid-summer (July) and again after the feather growth stops (first week of August). Pruning no later than mid August will allow the plant to callus and, therefore, reduce winter injury.

Yews have few insect problems, but there are several that are catastrophic. Black vine weevil is a most serious problem. The adult feeds on the foliage, taking crescent-shaped bites out of the needles while the larvae feed on the root system, reducing it to a point where the plant declines or dies, going downhill slowly. There has been much work done recently at the Ohio Research and Development Station for the control of black vine weevil. Several compounds are showing effective control, such as Orthene or Guthion (registered Michigan label). One should check with one's individual Cooperative Extension Service.

Fletcher's scale can cause some defoliation, but if one is a keen observer, a simple spray in the spring with superior dormant oil (70+ second) will totally control this problem.

Red spider mite can cause problems during dry periods of summer. The symptoms include a reddish or bronze foliage. Two sprays of an adult miticide, e.g. Kelthane, or one spray with an ovicide, e.g. Morestan, will clean up this potential problem, but one should spray only when a problem exists.

Yews, due to their rich regal-green color, are effectively used in mass plantings or as specimen plantings. They are effectively combined with many plants but are aesthetically outstanding when combined with bedding plants, such as red geraniums or salvia. Yews grow well in shade or sunny conditions (watch varietal selections). While being perfectly hardy and able to withstand even the coldest winters, yews seem to be most sensitive to over watering or poorly drained soils. There are many growers who specialize in the production of yews. The areas of concentration would include Rhode Island, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Western Michigan. Whereas L.C. Chadwick was instrumental in the wide-spread production of yews in Ohio, Mr. N.I.W. Crik of Cottage Gardens was instrumental in its introduction to Michigan. Each area of the country has its favorite selections, but yews can be looked upon as truly regal landscape evergreens.

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