

Junipers: Part Two

By Randy Brooks, 2006

This article originally appeared in "Florida Bonsai" the magazine of the [Bonsai Societies of Florida](#).

VOL XXXVI NUMBER 4 ISSUE 144

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So, you've seen them in the bonsai rags, or you saw a few at the state convention or local show. Maybe, a member brought a specimen in to a club meeting. Whatever the case, the juniper bug has taken hold, and you've got to have one in your collection. You've seen how magnificent they can be, and you understand why, if there is bonsai royalty, junipers wear one of the crowns. Your desire is not that of the neophyte who acquires one with glued-on gravel and places it on top of his television so he can find inspiration or 'feel transported' when he gazes at it during Survivor commercials. No, your cravings run just a little bit deeper.

You've paid your dues. You're keeping trees alive, folks seemed genuinely impressed with your collection and the visions you're creating. You finally feel more like an artist than the guy or gal that just grows plants. Till now, you've fought off the temptation because of everything you've heard about how hard junipers are to grow. Or, maybe you're a seasoned pro who just never tried junipers because of all the great native material Florida has to offer, but now, after years in the hobby, you want a new challenge, a new flavor to spice up your plate.

In any event, the bug has bit and it will not be sated until you've got a juniper in your collection. But, where do you begin? No one else is growing them either. You seek advice, but even some of the masters you know seem to advise against it. "Why bother," they say, "when you've got so much fantastic other material around that is far easier to grow?" Ah, but the warrior fire in you is even more stoked by the challenge, and you just know how great the rewards are for those that stay the trail!

But, you have questions, so many questions? What varieties will give you the best chance for success? Which ones are easiest to grow in Florida? Which ones are easiest to style and will provide the best results? What about pests and disease?

Sometimes the answers are more obvious than you might think. You just need to be looking for the obvious. And then there is always Google. Maybe though, your trusty BSF publication can provide a few answers, and we can give your surf weary fingers a break. So sit back and relax as we attempt to provide you some clues to help you get started with junipers.

As we mentioned, sometimes answers can be pretty obvious. When asking what species and varieties will do best in your area, a ready answer is, "Look and see what your local nurseries are selling." They're in the business to make a profit, so if they're reputable and know what they are doing, it's doubtful that they are going to bring in stock that isn't going to survive. They may have to keep it alive for an extended period. Tastes come and go even in the landscape business, and they surely don't want disgruntled customers. Repeat business is just as important to them as to anyone else. So, it's a pretty good bet that whatever you can find locally is going to work out just fine. Now, having said that, there are a few caveats you need to be aware of.

Nurseries do like to stock junipers with “Rug” and “Blue” in the name. If the stock you are looking at contains either one of these words in the name, I would advise to keep looking for more suitable material. “Rug” varieties are usually creeping, and while they are sometimes used to create cascades, they often do not have either enough taper or sufficient apical growth to make material that is convincing as a tree. “Blue” varieties can be problematic because they are more susceptible to every pest and disease that junipers are prone to. They attract mites even more than other varieties. Galls, twig blights, and root rot all attack them with far great vigor. There are two other things to be aware of when choosing your material. Junipers grow as three distinct types of plant. Some are very prostrate, being nothing more than ground covers. Your ‘Rug’ varieties are of this type. Then there are the mounding and shrub-like varieties. In the examples discussed below, the ‘Parsonii’, ‘Nana’, ‘Shimpaku’, and all chinensis fall into this type. Finally, there are the true trees. In nature, these junipers often reach heights 30 feet or better. Rocky Mountain juniper, Eastern Red Cedar, and ‘Hollywood’ juniper are of this growth habit. All make wonderful bonsai, but the growth type in nature will have a tendency to dictate the size of your bonsai.

The other consideration is the foliage type that a species or ‘variety’ normally exhibits. Junipers have two types of foliage. Some junipers exhibit both types of foliage at once. Others will exhibit one type or the other depending on age and health. We’ll talk more about these two growth types in the future, but for now just be aware of what they are. The first is ‘juvenile’. This type of growth is needle-like. The second type is ‘adult’ or scale foliage and is softer to the touch, sometimes described as rope or thread-like.

Which varieties are good here in Florida? Actually, the pickings are pretty good, but there are trends. It will seem like every nursery you go into is carrying the same thing, and that is to be expected because they all buy from the same distributors and wholesalers. The more we see fuel prices explode, the more this will be true. It’s just cheaper. Having special material shipped in from Oregon, Washington, or California is not as practical as buying from in-state, Georgia, or the Carolinas. This is to your advantage, so make use of it. Since they all carry the same stock, it is a buyer’s market. Shop around. Get the best material, at the best price that you can.

Since we are in Florida, it is only fitting that we start with the juniper that is native to our state, *Juniperus virginiana*. It is commonly called Eastern Red Cedar. Some southern horticulturists also claim there is a Southern Red Cedar, *Juniperus silicicola*, but there is debate regarding whether it is a different species or just a ‘variety’ of Eastern Red Cedar.

There is really no difference in their growth habit, culture, or appearance, so we will consider them to be the same here. This is an easy juniper to grow. It is very resistant to most pests and diseases, although occasionally both twig blights, phomopsis and cercospora, that attack junipers in Florida, will use them as hosts. Both are easily controlled. Root rot is not a concern as long as a well draining soil is used, and you are in bonsai, so you’re using good soil- anyway, right? Eastern Red Cedar can handle almost any pruning regimen you can throw at them (even shearing which is generally a no-no), and are surely the easiest of all junipers to repot. They can handle pretty severe root pruning without showing any stress.

Because they are so tough and resilient, they are also easy to style. Eastern Red Cedar can show both types of juniper growth, but they will tend to produce more juvenile growth, and this

is probably what you should strive for on these plants since it is nearly impossible to get them to exclusively produce the adult foliage. All junipers look best when the foliage type is consistent.

They are one species of tree that will readily provide material for outstanding formal uprights. You can jin and shari to your heart's content without harm. They make excellent material for forests or groupings.

We can sometimes find *Juniperus chinensis* 'Foemina' in nurseries, and you will find it very similar culturally and stylistically to Eastern Red Cedar. You will also find 'Sylvestrii', or Sylvester's juniper, in nurseries, especially farther north in the state, and it has similar growth and culture habits, but has almost exclusively adult foliage. All three features get two big thumbs up. The most common juniper found in nurseries and nursery centers today, at least in S. Florida, is Parson's Juniper. This is an excellent example of just how mixed up taxonomy is when it comes to junipers. This juniper is often recognized as *Juniperus squamata* 'Parsonii', *Juniperus chinensis* 'Parsonii', *Juniperus parsonii*, *Juniperus davurica* 'Parsonii', *Juniperus davurica expansa* 'Parsonii', and *Juniperus prostrata*. In Florida it usually goes by the common name Parson's Juniper or Parsonii Juniper, but in California they call it by the common name Prostrata. As you can see, even though it goes by various common names, the scientific identification is even vaguer. This is true of many junipers. Again, considering we are in Florida, it is a safe wager that you will probably find it with Parson somewhere in the name.

Parsonii are easy to grow. You will find it to be more pest and disease resistant than even Eastern Red Cedar. It is only slightly more prone to root rot than Eastern Red Cedar, and it does not quite handle the severity of root work that Eastern Red Cedar does. Parsonii do take well to pruning, back budding is excellent, and this is fantastic material for informal upright and cascading styles. They will normally exhibit the adult or scale foliage unless stressed, and indeed, the foliage displayed can be an indicator of the plant's health. With attention to horticulture, and detailed wiring, Parsonii can produce excellent specimens. For a variety of the shrub-like growth habit, Parsonii can produce some impressive trunks, especially on smaller bonsai.

Our next contestant on the hit list parade is probably the second most commonly used juniper for bonsai.

Juniperus procumbens 'nana' produces scale foliage here in S. Florida although in the Carolinas and California they have a tendency to produce small juvenile needles. I would expect happy healthy trees in the rest of Florida to produce the adult scale foliage. I have seen and purchased plants here in Florida that had juvenile foliage, but that quickly changed to the scale foliage once they were established and cared for.

'Nana' is very disease resistant, but is more susceptible to mites than 'Parsonii'. The compactness and fullness of the foliage make them one of the easiest of junipers to style. They will require some protection from afternoon heat during the hottest summer months, otherwise they will be stressed. Their poor roots seem to cook in the heat. This is a species of juniper that is readily found in the garden centers of your major retailers.

They are often found staked into an upright position, this creates reverse taper in the trunks. Wherever the trunk is stressed it will want to swell. The staking does help to create plants more suitable for bonsai, just be aware of the taper when making a selection. Staked plants will sometimes have branching only high up on the plant – avoid these. Find plants with good taper and branching all along the trunk. But, then, isn't this always the rule? Speaking of rules, I know I recommended staying away from junipers with 'Blue' in the name, but rules are made to be broken, and the exception to that rule would be Blue Vase. This juniper can be found in nearly every size imaginable depending on the nursery. Small, one-gallon plants can be had as well as 25 gallon material. Even in the larger sizes they tend to be very reasonably priced. These are easy plants to grow, but keeping the foliage full and lush can sometimes be a little challenging. They are prone to cercospora, and at times can be prone to mites. This can cause them to have a thin leggy appearance.

However, they do back bud well, as do all of the species mentioned here, and will recover if proper care is given. Blue Vase is easy to achieve basic styling with, but it can be a little more problematic to refine. They tend to want to exhibit both types of foliage, and their growth pattern isn't as full and lush as 'Parsonii', 'Nana', or Shimpaku, which we will discuss shortly. They do possess some of the nicest trunks of any junipers that you will work, so they are not without their merits. And, again, they are usually a bargain compared to other material.

'Tortulosa' or 'Hollywood' junipers are beautiful trees with a distinctive bright green color, a tell-tale growth pattern of plumes of adult foliage, and wonderful fat trunks. These are definitely one of the easiest of all junipers to grow. Don't be afraid to purchase smaller trees than what you are after. By potting up, 'Hollywood' juniper will get large in record time. It is nearly impossible to get these junipers to grow with anything other than the adult foliage. If you want something soft on the hands, this would be a good choice.

They seem to be impervious to everything except total neglect. They are fast growers and respond readily to styling. Styling should be started when the plants are young though, otherwise they will lack movement and taper in their trunks. Also, their foliage will continually attempt to define itself in the plume-like growth that they prefer, so this must be considered during styling and refinement.

Another juniper that grows in a plume-like manner is Rocky Mountain juniper, *Juniperus scopulorum*. Rocky Mountain juniper is one of the most common junipers used in creating hybrids in the nursery trade in this country. Thousands of juniper varieties sold for the landscape are crosses of Rocky Mountain juniper. The species is also available, though I haven't seen it sold in South or Central Florida. Its crosses are found, however, and their growth habits and appearance are nearly as varied as is their number.

Thousands of crosses also exist for *Juniperus chinensis*. Where *scopulorum* crosses are more treelike, *chinensis* crosses are more shrub-like. *Scopulorum* crosses will tend to have foliage that is more open, whereas *chinensis* will be more compact. However, junipers are varied, and their crosses are more so, so expect exceptions. Which brings us to the Cadillac of junipers, the cr' me de cr' me. If there is one juniper that you should attempt to add to your collection, this is it. It is so perfect for bonsai that it nearly styles itself. Impervious to pests and diseases, it will grow into a beautiful specimen with nearly no effort on your part. It will back bud on the oldest of wood. It is truly the miracle plant of bonsai! What is this amazing

plant that stupefies and amazes? What juniper could be so magnificent as to cause men to lust for it and women to swoon? That could challenge even the might Japanese Black Pine for the top spot in bonsai royalty? Enough already? heh-heh!

'Shimpaku' is all of this and more. It is the plant that needs go by one name only, like Sting, or Ali, or Madonna. It is a plant that was once so coveted as to cause men to risk their lives to retrieve them from the mountains of Japan. If you can find one, you will surely be rewarded for your quest and perseverance. Dark green foliage set against beautiful red bark with stark white jins and sharis to remind us that this is a plant that fought all odds to survive, to thrive, and still possess the splendor that it does. Don't bother looking in a regular nursery. You'll probably be wasting your time. You will surely need to obtain one from a bonsai nursery, and even raw material will likely be expensive.

And while it may seem odd that a tree that finds its roots in the snow-capped mountains of Japan could survive even in S. Florida, but, it does.

Those of you living farther north will have even more outstanding results. Well, that should be enough to get you out and doing some nursery crawling. Just like any other material, find the best you can afford. Good taper, plenty of branching, health, find all of attributes you look for, and then in next and last of this series, we'll talk about keeping them alive, and cover some styling objectives as much as we can in print. Happy trees!