

# Pacific Horticulture

... a resource for West Coast gardeners

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Podophyllums   Conifers   Bees   Gardens in Palo Alto, Huntington Beach, Eugene, and Marin

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Lemon-scented gum (*Corymbia citriodora*, formerly *Eucalyptus citriodora*); see page 48. Photograph by Matt Ritter



# The Barrett Garden: A Case Study in Designing with Conifers

RICHARD L BITNER and CASSANDRA BARRETT

*Designing with Conifers: The Best Choices for Year-Round Interest in Your Garden*, Richard Bitner's third book on conifers, is due to be released from Timber Press in spring 2011. This case study of Cassandra and Bryan Barrett's garden near Eugene, Oregon, is adapted from that book.

Conifers. Perhaps no group of plants is so poorly used in our *gardens*, even though they play a multitude of roles in our *landscapes*. They serve as lush shade trees and useful hedges, foundation shrubs, groundcovers, and rock garden regulars. They grow so agreeably in the Pacific Northwest that they seem to be everywhere in the background. And what's not to like about them? We love their texture, their colors, the seasonal changes many exhibit, and, perhaps most of all, their *permanence*.

Unfortunately for the designed landscape, cheap, fast-growing selections are often planted too close to structures and to one another. They soon block windows and hang over driveways, and the property owner is forced to butcher them. We do not have to drive far to find beautiful homes whose walls and doorways are hidden by yews, arborvitaes, or other conifers that should have been removed years earlier.

At the same time, when we sit back to view our garden borders, we often sense that something is missing, something more is needed for them to be completely satisfying. What's missing is likely a sense of unity, an underlying structure—sometimes referred to as the “bones” of a well designed garden—to frame the display of more ephemeral seasonal effects.

Deciduous shrubs are bare several months of the year, and herbaceous plants turn into withered straw-colored blobs in winter. A garden that draws busloads of camera-laden visitors in summer may have little to look at in winter. Well-chosen conifers can help resolve these commonly encountered design issues.

Cassandra and Bryan Barrett have operated a landscape design and installation business out of their home not far from Eugene, Oregon for more than fifteen years. They are a dynamic pair, passionate about their profession. A 2.5-acre personal garden surrounds their home and serves as a resource for discussing designs with clients. Together, they take responsibility for all phases of their commissions: design, installation of hardscape and plants, and maintenance.

I have visited their garden in different seasons and consider it one that exemplifies the way well-selected conifers can be imaginatively integrated into complex mixed borders that provide structure and interest throughout the year, without excessive maintenance.

A section of garden in front of the Barretts' Arts & Crafts-style home will serve as an example of the many ideas to be considered in designing with conifers. The flow through the garden seems perfectly natural and the plant-



ings, while complex, seem to be all of a piece. We have chosen to “deconstruct” a portion of that garden and explain in detail both the design principles and the reasons for specific plant selections. The rest of this article is in Cassandra’s words.

## Cassandra on Design

I have always been drawn to conifers; their habits, their new growth, and their varied textures are indispensable as well as functional through the year. They provide screening and enclosure for garden spaces and are rarely messy, dropping their needles sparingly and immediately below. The beautiful new growth on larches (*Larix*) and bald-cypress (*Taxodium distichum*), and a pine’s new “candles” are as appealing as the swelling buds on a flowering tree. The secret to their successful use in design is to become knowledgeable about the habits and variety of a range of conifers, particularly the slow-growing selections becoming more readily available. Bryan and I have made this a focus of our work.

When designing a frontside garden, I like to design from inside the house as well as from outside. The view from the house is as important as the foundation plantings, which are usually meant only to frame the house when viewed from the road.

I design a border as if I were decorating a room. I decide where the big things go, what needs to be hidden, and what part of the larger space I want to borrow. Then I begin to design the more intimate spaces, working with the textures, colors, and shapes (upright, globular, spreading) of the conifers and all of the other plants. I try to visualize the design in layers—usually an upper story, a mid-story, and an understory.

## Upper Story Plantings

In the upper story, I place the tallest plants, but select those with a medium growth rate. Using taller plants in a limited space actually makes the area appear bigger because of the

## Cassandra’s Design Principles

- Plan the hardscape elements first: terraces and decks, walks and steps, walls, fences, and gateways, night lighting, benches and boulders, and the larger containers.
- Scale is of utmost importance; use fewer plants and a bolder design for a big house on a small lot.
- Pay special attention to the entrances into the garden.
- Design for views from inside the house, as well as for views from outside toward the house.
- Marry the house to the landscape by using plants that echo the colors of the exterior.
- Select the big things first (the “bones” of the garden), plants chosen for shade, screening, and enclosure; then work on the intimate spaces.
- Choose plants for how they will perform in all seasons—particularly in fall and winter; I choose fifty percent of my plants for their fall and winter appearance, twenty-five percent for spring, and twenty-five percent for summer.
- Choose about five dependable (for your microclimate) plants to be repeated throughout the garden for design continuity (deciduous, evergreen, woody, conifer, herbaceous).
- When considering conifers, focus on those that are slow growing, and preferably growing on their own roots.
- Include some specimen plants that add pizzazz to the design.
- Plant the understory densely by using a rhythmic design that repeats throughout the perimeter plantings (mulch gardens are not inspiring).
- “Grow to know.” The descriptions of newly introduced plants are often inaccurate or exaggerated; don’t be afraid to experiment with a plant in your garden to determine where it might ultimately fit into your design.
- Incorporate exceptional garden containers, choosing colors that compliment or contrast with your plant palette.
- Don’t hesitate to work with a plant-oriented landscape designer; a knowledgeable professional can save you time, energy, and money.



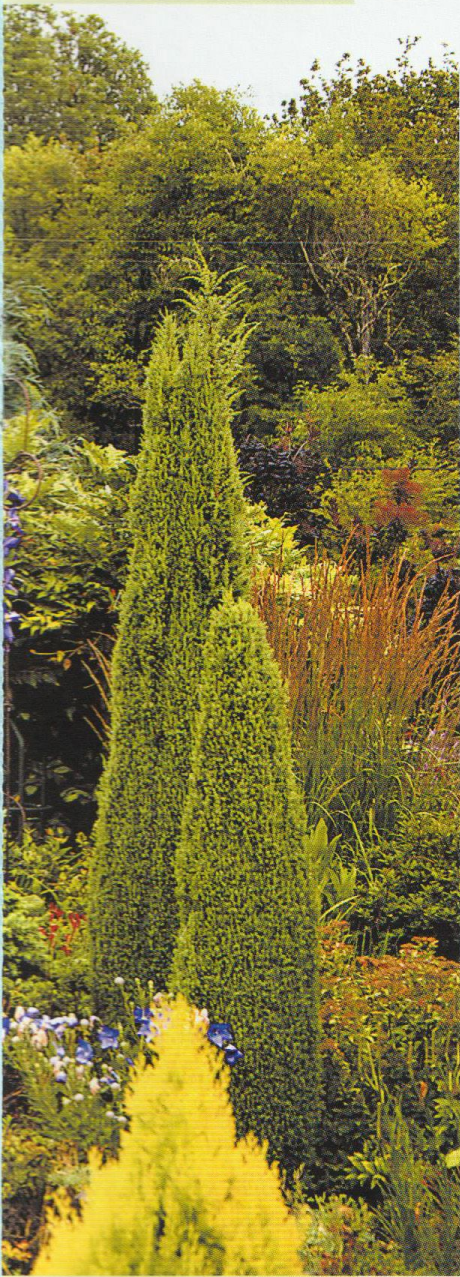


The front border of the Barrett Garden. Photographs by Richard Bitner



- Understory plantings: (1) *Calluna vulgaris* 'Aurea'; (2) *Erica* 'Spring Surprise'; (3) *Carex comans* bronze-leaved; (4) *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Little Bunny'; (5) *Molinia caerulea* 'Moorflamme'; (6) *Hemerocallis* 'Candy Apple'; (7) *Crocsmia* × *latifolia* 'Lucifer'; (8) *Platycodon grandiflorus* 'Fuji Blue'; (9) *Calluna vulgaris* 'Mousehole'; (10) *Spiraea japonica* 'Golden Elf'; (11) *Sedum rupestre* 'Angelina'; (12) *Thymus* 'Aurea'





Upper story conifer plantings: (1) *Pinus virginiana* 'Wate's Golden'; (2) *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Pelt's Blue'; (3) *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Elegans'; (4) *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* 'Glauca Pendula'; (5) *Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Gracilis'



Mid-story conifer plantings: (1) *Juniperus communis* 'Compressa'; (2) *J. communis* 'Pencil Point'; (3) *Thuja orientalis* 'Sunlight'; (4) *Pinus strobus* 'Horsford'; (5) *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Duncanii'; (6) *Abies koreana* 'Silberlocke' (hidden in picture); (7) *Pinus contorta* var. *latifolia* 'Chief Joseph'; (8) *Cedrus deodara* 'Devinely Blue'; (9) *Tsuga canadensis* 'Jeddeloh'; (10) *Pinus aristata* 'Sherwood Compact'; (11) *Abies procera* (Glauca Group) 'Nana'; (12) *Cedrus libani* 'Sargentii' (hidden)



Mid-story deciduous plantings: (A) *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo' (hidden in photo); (B) *Corylus avellana* 'Contorta'; (C) *Hamamelis* × *intermedia* 'Primavera' and 'Diane'; (D) *Aralia elata* 'Aureovariegata'; (E) *Mahonia* × *media* 'Charity'; (F) *Hebe insularis* 'James Stirling'; (G) *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* 'Rotfuchs'; (H) *Rhododendron* 'Night Editor'; (J) *Clematis* 'Jackmanii Superba', 'Betty Corning', or 'Gravetye Beauty'



graduated heights within the planting. The taller plants not only screen what is behind (in our case, the township road), but also frame the foreground plantings and, in a larger sense, the house.

In our front border, I began with *Pinus virginiana* 'Wate's Golden' for its fresh green, summertime foliage, which becomes a school-bus yellow from mid-autumn to early summer (October to June). It has a somewhat stiff texture but can be candled (new growth pinched back) to keep it compact. Then I added a nearly columnar selection of Lawson-cypress (*Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Pelt's Blue'), with a lacy texture and powder blue year-round color. A perpetually juvenile selection of Japanese-cedar (*Cryptomeria japonica* 'Elegans') offers a soft, fluffy texture and turns a smoky plum in the winter.

I used yellow-cedar (*Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* 'Glauca Pendula') here and elsewhere in the garden because of its narrow, graceful form. Ultimately, it will be the tallest plant in this area. Considering the "borrowed" landscape (actually the evolving extension of our garden across the road), I planted a natural looking grouping of three. Finally, I included the delightful hinoki cypress (*C. obtusa* 'Gracilis') for its easy growth, fan-shaped foliage, and good color all year.

All of these conifers have somewhat different habits and textures, and some change color through the seasons, but they complement each other beautifully.

## Mid-story Plantings

The primary consideration in designing the mid-story plantings is that plants in this layer are at eye level, and any visitor is going to notice them the most. I return to the analogy of decorating a room: it is in the choice of plants for the mid-story that I introduce my personal style and individual taste—or that of a client, which might be minimalist, formal, cottagey, or full of pizzazz. The mid-story represents the largest mass of plants in the garden, and it needs to be well thought-out. The mid-story mixes conifers, chosen for their year-round

color and texture, with other woody and herbaceous plants.

Here in our front border, I clustered columnar selections of common juniper (*Juniperus communis*) for a strong vertical element in the mid-story: two 'Compressa' and a taller 'Pencil Point'. A golden arborvitae (*Thuja orientalis* 'Sunlight'), its foliage held in vertical sprays, adds a cone shape to the composition. A bun-shaped Eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus* 'Horsford') offers soft green needles with a silvery reflection. *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Duncanii' complements the others with its rounded shape. The sterling silver, curled needles of a Korean fir (*Abies koreana* 'Silberlocke') turn powder blue in winter. A dwarf lodgepole pine (*Pinus contorta* var. *latifolia* 'Chief Joseph') brightens the scene with its striking yellow winter color, echoing that of 'Wate's Golden' pine in the upper story.

I like to use about five reliable plants in this layer that I can repeat elsewhere in the garden. This unifies borders throughout a larger garden, even though each border might have a different focus. These plantings will include conifers, broad-leaved evergreens, deciduous shrubs, and larger herbaceous plants—all chosen for multi-season interest.

Among deciduous shrubs, the burgundy foliage of a ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Diabolo') lends a contrasting foliar note; its pink flowers and lacquer red fruit are a delightful bonus. I cut back the older growth every other spring to encourage strong new shoots. The curiously contorted winter silhouette of Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta') is without equal, and its golden catkins really stand out. Two witch hazels (*Hamamelis* × *intermedia* 'Primavera' and 'Diane') are indispensable for their yellow leaves in autumn and their fragrant flowers in late winter. Their vase-like forms allow for easy planting beneath.

For a bold-textured accent with variegated foliage, I chose *Aralia elata* 'Aureovariegata'. Its showy, late summer flower heads are a genuine bee magnet. *Mahonia* × *media* 'Charity' adds more bold-textured foliage along with fragrant, late winter yellow flowers, which are visited by honey bees who dare to venture out on warm



afternoons. The small blue fruits are gorgeous, until they are devoured by cedar waxwings.

Hidden behind the mahonia is a short-statured Mexican orange (*Choisya ternata* 'Sundance'), grown for its bold yellow evergreen leaves and fragrant flowers. Also hidden are two daphnes (*Daphne* × *napolitana* and *D.* × *houtteana*) whose attractive foliage is secondary to their winter/spring fragrance—a delightful presence in the garden, even if the plants are sometimes hidden from view.

At the opposite end of the textural scale is *Hebe insularis* 'James Stirling', notable for its bronze foliage and uniform, dome-shaped habit. Its color and fine texture are echoed by bronze hair sedge (*Carex comans* bronze form), planted in the understory.

The distinct pattern created by the heart-shaped leaves of katsura tree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum* 'Rotfuchs') always attracts attention; I eagerly look forward to its clear yellow autumn leaves with their delightful, cotton-candy fragrance.

Small leaves and purple flowers set *Rhododendron* 'Night Editor' apart; its stiff open habit allows me to underplant it solidly. I use clematis here and there in the border, usually grown on metal teepees. Three of my favorites are *Clematis* 'Jackmanii Superba', *C.* 'Betty Corning', and *C.* 'Gravetye Beauty'.

## Understory Plantings

Many clients don't want as many plants in their garden as we do. They're used to a mulch garden with a few plants at arm's length from one another. Their hesitancy to plant a full, richly diverse garden reminds me of the emperor's comment after hearing one of Mozart's operas: "An excellent effort! [but] there are simply too many notes."

We take a different approach, reveling in a solid matrix of low plantings that may include woody shrubs, trailing vines, herbaceous perennials, and seasonal bulbs. The smaller conifers in the border serve as an evergreen backdrop for these plants, most of which have been chosen for their flowers. Even in the understory, most of the plants have more than

one season of interest, either from distinctive foliage color (*Calluna* and *Erica*), texture (*Carex* and *Molinia*), or lasting seedheads (*Sedum*). A number of these understory plantings are highlighted in the photograph on page 32.

## The Front Border in Winter

Our border looks bigger in winter because of the absence of leaves on the deciduous shrubs and trees and the reduced presence of the dormant perennials. The bones of the design stand out now. If a design is not cleverly planned for its fall and winter appearance, the garden will be disappointing. Unfortunately, many borders are blah during these seasons and do not encourage lingering.

At this time of year, you are especially aware of the layers in our front garden, but you still do not see the road beyond. Nor are you aware that the border is actually relatively shallow (thirty feet) with respect to its length (one hundred feet). The winter picture is the blueprint of the design, where one *has* to start. Now one can see why the plants, both conifers and others, were chosen: shapes, textures, colored stems and leaves, vibrancy—and even fragrant winter flowers.

In the upper story, 'Wate's Golden' pine is now screaming yellow, *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Elegans' has become a wonderful smoky plum color, and the blue of *Chamaecyparis lawsoniana* 'Pelt's Blue' is more intense.

In the mid-story layer, Harry Lauder's walking stick is hung with catkins. *Thuja orientalis* 'Sunlight' is tipped in burnished gold. There are flowers on *Mahonia* × *media* 'Charity', and the witch hazels will follow soon. 'Chief Joseph' pine, scarcely noticed in summer, is now a high-pitched yellow. The dwarf form of noble fir (*Abies procera* 'Nana') has taken on a more powdery blue hue.

In the understory, the heather (*Calluna vulgaris* 'Aurea') that was gold in the summer is now green; another (*C. vulgaris* 'Mousehole') now mimics the cryptomeria with smoky plum-colored foliage. The bronze hair sedge is now a dramatic focal point, and *Pennisetum alopecuroides* 'Little Bunny' has taken on tawny





The front garden



A winter view of the front garden looking toward the road

tints. The low-growing sedum (*Sedum rupestre* 'Angelina') is an eye-catching orange.

It's time to use conifers in more creative ways. They offer a range of attributes—size, shape, color, and texture—and are rarely finicky. They

may serve as backdrop, as partners to architecture and hardscape, but also as specimen and accent plants. The slower-growing cultivars beg to be integrated into our borders—selected for their habit and foliage and even, perhaps, for their winter color. 🌲