

How to care for Pacific yew



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Question: I was given a potted Pacific Yew for the holidays. Can you give me some advice on the care and maintenance of this mysterious tree?

Answer: Pacific yew (*Taxus brevifolia*) is a member of the Taxaceae family. It is a native tree to our Pacific Northwest forests.

The Taxaceae family, known for its red, berry-like seeds called arils, is one that has both a far reaching history and an interesting future. Yews have long been part of the Christmas tradition. Sprigs are often cut from yews to be used like holly in natural Christmas decorations.

The wood of Pacific yew was used by indigenous people to make many kinds of tools and weapons, particularly bows. Young men would rub themselves with smooth yew sticks to give them strength.

There are more than a dozen species of yew, with most being native to other countries. Linked to antiquity, yews are associated with both folklore and legend. The Druids in pre-Christian times considered yew to be sacred, due in part to its longevity. There are specimens of yews in Europe still growing today estimated to be between 2,000 to 3,000 years old.

Later in history, the English longbow was made from the wood of a species of yew native to the British Isles. History



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records this longbow was considered to be one of the finest weapons in Medieval Europe and gave the British a tactical advantage over the French in the 'Hundred Years War.'

Additionally, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, "slips of yew, silvered in the moon's eclipse" were part of the ingredients bubbling in the witches' cauldron. The latter was for good reason.

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There are many varieties of trees and shrubs that make up the yew (*Taxus*) genus. In general, these plants are easy to care for and can tolerate a range of growing conditions. They are considered by many to be one of the best groups of evergreen shrubs for landscape plantings.

Larger yew trees, like the Pacific yew, are excellent specimens to use as a focal point in the landscape while

some of the smaller prostrate yews are suitable as a large scale groundcover. The majority of yews, however, are used for hedges; there is a yew for almost any desired hedge height. They are often sheared into a formal shape and are one of the few evergreen needle-bearing plants that are suitable for hedges in shady conditions.

All yews can be grown in full sun, partial shade, or even full shade. For healthy and lush branching growth, opt for a spot that gets several hours of sun each day. Too much shade can cause thin and floppy growth.

Yews can tolerate several soil types, as long as the soil has good drainage. Yews tend to thrive in rich loamy soil with a neutral soil pH. Yews prefer a moderate amount of soil moisture; however, it can tolerate short periods of drought.

During the first year after planting, water the yew regularly to maintain even soil moisture. Fertilize your yew in the early spring, beginning a year after planting. Mulch your tree with 1-2 inch of compost.

In addition to the native Pacific yew, there are many types of yew that are popular for landscape use, including:

■ *Taxus baccata* 'Repandens': This variety grows roughly 2 to 4 feet high by 12 to 15 feet wide and is used for foundation

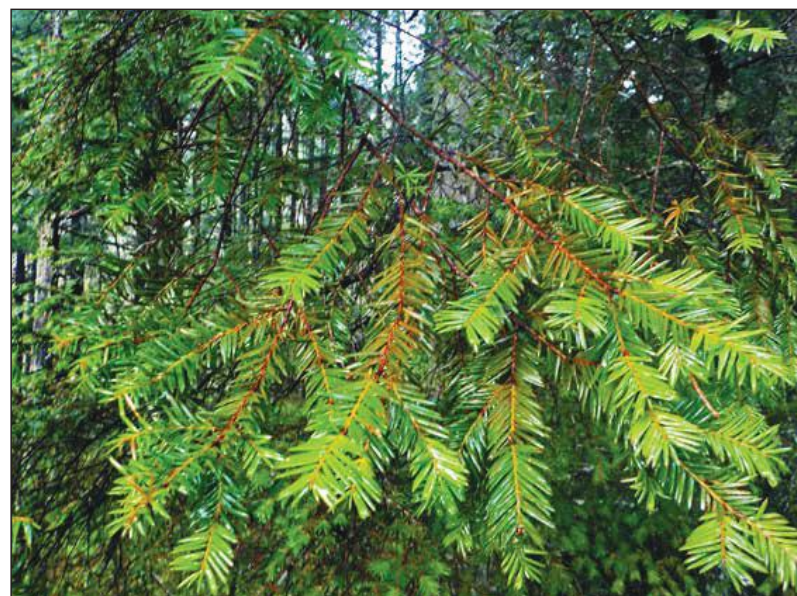


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■ *Taxus canadensis*: Known as Canadian yew, this species has a spreading growth habit and reaches around 4 feet high by 7 feet wide.

■ *Taxus baccata* 'Fastigiata': This plant has a columnar shape at around 15 to 30 feet high by 4 to 8 feet wide and is often used for privacy hedges.

■ *Taxus cuspidata* 'Monloo': This variety grows to around 3 feet high by 8 to 10 feet wide and is used for foundation plantings or short hedges.

■ *Taxus × media* 'Hicksii': This plant also has a columnar shape at around 15 feet high by 20 feet wide and is used for privacy hedges.

Although many prefer its

cultivated cousins, the Pacific yew may find a perfect home in a landscape for those that can appreciate its unconventional beauty. For those that have a small yard and cannot plant any of the larger native conifers, this little jewel may be the perfect choice!

Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.