

CONIFERS IN URBAN GARDENS

Many previous owners of properties across coastal Sussex have planted conifers, and some still do, often to create a tall shield against the winds coming off the sea; to provide a boundary hedge for privacy, and seemingly to take over as much of the neighbouring garden as possible; or just as specimen trees. For many reasons the planting of conifers in counties like East and West Sussex needs to be reassessed. The British Isles is a northern European region with respect to its biogeography, and only 33 trees are native, including just 3 conifers, the Scots Pine, Larch, and Juniper, all native to northern Britain. A fourth conifer, the Yew, has been here for centuries, and must be considered naturalised. All other conifers that have been planted in Sussex are alien, and as such provide poor habitat for our native wildlife. In most locations such biologically useless plants are best removed.

Our native deciduous and evergreen trees, especially the former, have enormous permanent populations of microorganisms, invertebrates, fungi, and other wildlife, whereas conifers have virtually none, and are better replaced by deciduous or evergreen flowering native trees. Replacing them with other aliens or with horticultural varieties won't improve the natural sustainability of the site. Sourcing native trees is easily done nowadays, as the demand rises each year. In addition to being poor habitat, conifers are messy, depositing large quantities of slowly decaying 'needles', which blanket and impoverish the soil beneath. It is difficult to find plants that will flourish, or even grow at all, under conifers, whereas there is a large selection of native plants to create an attractive and biologically useful under-storey around non-coniferous native trees.

The use of power tools to trim conifers presents our wildlife with another problem – the 'conifer wall'. This is like an impenetrable green barrier, which birds, for example, are deterred from burrowing through. There is nothing inside for them if they do manage to enter, just a silent, dark interior with no food or suitability for socialising. A deciduous hedge of, say, beech, by contrast, has filtered light, high populations of small creatures, good cover with many perching places, and the sounds of a small community that feels secure. This is what our beleaguered wildlife needs. And if that deciduous hedge were managed with hand tools it would be far stronger, less damaged, and have more vigorous growth than if it had to suffer destructive, indiscriminate slashing with power tools.

As John Wyndham might have put it, it is time for the day of the conifers to end. The replacement of conifers with native trees will see a dramatic improvement in the quality of the natural environment in those areas where the replacement is done, attracting considerably more wildlife, giving pleasure to us all, and helping to sustain our endangered wild populations.

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