

Cryptomeria japonica
'Black Dragon' is for many
a favorite selection in the
genus, due to the dark
green, almost black needles
that give it its name.

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GREAT PLANT PICKS

Captivating *Cryptomeria*

Fascinating foliage and shifting colors are
just two reasons these conifers catch the eye

By Loree Bobl

How much can be written about a monotypic genus — a plant for which only one species exists?

Well, if that plant is *Cryptomeria japonica*, then quite a lot. There are many ornamental selections in cultivation, all of which have captivating qualities.

The national tree of Japan, where it is known as “sugi,” *Cryptomeria* is often referred to as Japanese cedar in the United States, even though it bears no

relation to true cedars.

Throughout Japan, *Cryptomeria* is commonly found planted near temples and shrines. Many are ancient specimens of impressive size. *Cryptomeria* is also cultivated for lumber and provides wood for the construction of temples and temple carvings.

According to Greg Anderson, manager of the B&B division at Bizon Nursery, a wholesaler in Hubbard, Oregon, *Cryptomeria* is typically planted in the

U.S. as an ornamental planting or in multiples to provide windbreaks and privacy hedges. The latter is a use often seen on larger estates. A prime example of this style of planting is the grand row of more than a dozen *C. japonica* ‘Yoshino’ trees that stand next to the nursery.

On the opposite end of the size spectrum are dwarf and slow-growing Japanese cedars, which are popular for fairy gardens as well as container plantings and small yards, accord-

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ing to Chris Steinke, sales manager at Youngblood Wholesale Nursery in Salem, Oregon.

Cryptomeria prefers moist, rich, well-draining soil. Drought tolerance is not one of its selling points. It wants full sun, although some light shade is tolerated and even desired for those cultivars with light-colored new growth. Drying winter winds are not abided. Typical hardiness falls within USDA zones 5 to 9, and humid conditions are not a problem. As a group, they are largely maintenance free and rarely bothered by pests.

A conifer apart

What sets *Cryptomeria* apart from other conifers? In Anderson's words, it's "a second season of color."

Many take on a bronze or purple tint in the wintertime. While most see



New growth on *Cryptomeria* often has interesting color contrasting that of the mature growth. *C.j.* 'Black Dragon', shown here, is one example of that. Needles can also change color with the seasons, or develop highlights. PHOTO BY LOREE BOHL



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Cryptomeria japonica 'Elegans', also known as plume cedar, makes for a soft and bushy tree with purple-to-bronze highlights during the wintertime. PHOTO COURTESY OF GREAT PLANT PICKS

this as a benefit, Steinke said it is an issue requiring education. Customers need to be made aware their tree isn't dying, but simply changing for the season and bringing another layer of interest to the garden.

Anne Marsh, of Marsh & Fear Garden Solutions in Portland, Oregon, recommended planting these seasonal chameleons with plants whose foliage leans toward the blue-green end of the spectrum, thus complementing their winter color. Marsh also believes that Japanese cedar is one of the rare conifers that can regenerate lost branches and sprout new growth from cut stumps.

In addition to their seasonal color shift, Japanese cedars bring dramatic texture to the garden. Their twisting needles, interesting forms and peeling cinnamon bark are often compared to that of the giant sequoia, *Sequoiadendron* ▶



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giganteum. Their small cones and seed-pods are highly decorative.

Popular cultivars

Youngblood Nursery, which specializes in dwarf varieties, lists 18 *Cryptomeria* cultivars in its current catalog; 14 are available at this writing.

Youngblood's steady bestseller, *C. japonica* 'Black Dragon', is most commonly used as a small specimen or container plant. A semi-dwarf tree, it grows up to 12 feet tall, with an overall upright, pyramidal, compact growth habit. Dark green, almost black, needles explain the name. Portland Nursery suggests 'Black Dragon' makes an excellent alternative to conventional holiday trees.

Steinke identified the cultivar *C. japonica* 'Rasen' as his favorite. In fact, he planted one in his home garden. A unique specimen and conversation



C.j. 'Little Diamond' is one Japanese cedar that doesn't change colors in the winter. It retains its bright green hue all year long. PHOTO BY JENNIFER DENNIS



The twisting, spiral needles of *Cryptomeria japonica* 'Rasen' wrap around branches for a unique, rope-like appearance. PHOTO BY LOREE BOHL



Cryptomeria japonica 'Mushroom' got its name from its mushroom-shaped growth habit. In the late fall, the needles turn the bronze-purple color shown here. PHOTO BY LOREE BOHL

piece, 'Rasen' has an open, loose habit with twisting needles that spiral around spindly branches. It is a fast grower — 6 to 12 inches per year — and will eventually reach 20 feet in height.

Perhaps the most recognized of the cultivars is *C. japonica* 'Elegans' (often referred to as "plume cedar"). It might also be the most colorful of the bunch. It turns a rich bronze to purple in late autumn and winter. Its persistently juvenile foliage is soft, feathery and more needle-like than other selections. 'Elegans' is a bushy tree, growing to 20 feet tall (or more) and 6 to 10 feet wide.

Youngblood also grows *C. japonica* 'Elegans Compacta', which, as its name suggests, stays a small shrub, broadly mounded to 10–15 feet. *C. japonica* 'Elegans Nana' is another dwarf variety that only reaches 2 feet tall and wide. Another selection, *C. japonica* 'Elegans Aurea', changes from bright green to yellow-green in the winter months.

Erich Petschke, corporate gardens manager for McMenamins, grows a row of 'Elegans Aurea' along a busy street in northeast Portland, where the trees provide screening for a parking lot. "They've been very easy trees once established, with more horizontally-held branches and no flopping," Petschke said. "Good growth rate, too."

Looking for a splash of white foliage? There's a *Cryptomeria* for that as well. *C. japonica* 'Knaptonensis' is a ▶

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Cryptomeria japonica 'Sekkan-sugi' is a Great Plant Picks selection. Its intense golden color makes a striking impression in the landscape, particularly if contrasted against darker foliage. Specimens can reach an eventual height of 30 feet.

PHOTO BY RICHIE STEFFEN/GREAT PLANT PICKS



C.j. 'Cristata' is one of the most unusual-looking conifers in existence, with its curvy, wand-like clumps of needled foliage. PHOTO COURTESY OF GREAT PLANT PICKS

dwarf shrub, slow growing to 2–3 feet tall in 10 years, with glowing white juvenile foliage. Steinke cautioned that placement is key for success with 'Knaptonensis'. "Too much sun results in the gorgeous white foliage burning," he said. "This shrub is best sheltered from direct sun."

Another dwarf offering from Youngblood is *C. japonica* 'Little Diamond'. This popular Japanese cedar does not bronze in winter, but retains its bright green foliage year round. It has a dense growing habit to 2 feet tall and slightly wider.

Of slightly larger size (3 feet tall and wide) is *C. japonica* 'Mushroom', a tidy, yet slow grower which turns a striking dark, bronzy purple when the temperatures fall in late autumn. No pruning is needed to maintain its mushroom-shaped dome.

Of the four different Japanese cedars grown at Bizon Nursery, the front runner is *C. japonica* 'Yoshino'. This fast-growing tree is frequently used as a hedge or windbreak; it can reach 15 feet in as little as eight years, providing quick impact. 'Yoshino' can take shade, although it will be slower growing than one placed in the sun.

Asked to name his favorite *Cryptomeria*, Anderson chose *C. japonica* 'Rein's Dense Jade'. An upright dwarf selection with twisted foliage reminiscent of dreadlocks, it eventually reaches



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8–10 feet tall and 4–5 feet wide. This variety also provides a winter color change to purple-plum.

With its creamy yellow to gold foliage, *C. japonica* 'Sekkan-Sugi' is near the top of everyone's list of favorites and is, in fact, a Great Plant Picks selection for Pacific Northwest gardens. Growing to an eventual height of approximately 30 feet, Marsh reported that 'Sekkan-Sugi' responds well to pruning for shape and size. Equally appropriate as a focal point or as a screen, 'Sekkan-Sugi' can be a bit of a drama queen.


"It is a visually dominant tree in the landscape because the foliage color is so intense and shines like a beacon if planted against a medium or dark green backdrop," states the Great Plant Picks website. "If you are not a fan of golden foliage, this is not the tree for you."

Conversely, if you are a fan, you've just found a treasure. Once established and with summer irrigation, 'Sekkan-Sugi' handles summer heat with no sunburn. It can show winter burn if sited in an exposed location; however, new green growth in the spring is quick to cover any burnt foliage.

Finally, proving there is a *Cryptomeria* for every gardener, even those seeking a look inspired by Dr. Seuss, there is *C. japonica* 'Cristata'. This specimen offers up fascinating cockscomb-like foliage on a tree eventually reaching 25 feet.

"This is one of the weirdest evergreen conifers you can grow," states the Great Plant Picks website. "It has an attractive columnar form with a full habit. The eye-catching trait is the odd, congested growth of bright green foliage on the tips of many of its branches. Use it as a specimen, with lots of space around it, and visitors are sure to comment." ☺


Loree Bohl is a plant lover who writes about her garden and plant-related adventures on her blog, dangergarden.blogspot.com. She is also a partner at plantlust.com. She can be reached at spikyplants@gmail.com.



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