



# Conifer Quarterly

Vol. 31 No. 2

Spring 2014

# A Return To Rochester (Ten Years Later)

Text and photo by Jerry and Karen Kral

In 2004, the Northeastern Region of the American Conifer Society visited Jerry and Karen Kral's gardens in Rochester, New York, and now, ten years later, Jerry and Karen are pleased to again welcome the NE Region of the American Conifer Society to their gardens. Returning members will be astonished at the changes. New visitors will be in for a special treat. Jerry and Karen's gardens have been featured in national publications and have hosted international, national, regional, and local garden societies. Considered the most visited private gardens in Western New York, in the past year alone, over 500 people enjoyed the special garden ambiance created by Jerry and Karen.

As I reflect on the last ten years, I thought it would be interesting to compare "what was then" with "what is now". Every garden has a special journey, and there are lessons to be learned and shared.

Ten years ago, I gardened on two thirds of an acre. Today I have an acre. I acquired an adjacent lot of about 14,000 square feet in 2008. My original gardens were mostly under the high deciduous shade of a black locust grove (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) and a large London plane tree (*Platanus x acerifolia*). The new lot is in full sun. At last, I could revel in the joy of collecting and growing the sun-loving conifers always denied me. My list of conifer cultivars expanded from about 250 to almost 360.

A meandering quarter mile pathway of Pennsylvania bluestone interconnecting dozens of small raised beds defined the 2004 garden.

Red and black  
pumice rock  
garden displaying  
miniature and  
dwarf conifers.  
*By Karen Kral*



Additional paths have since been added, leading to special areas of interest or comfy sitting nooks. Pathway construction continued into the new lot. The new pathways interconnect several styles of rock garden. Red and black pumice gardens were carefully designed to suggest actual lava flows and “thrusts” including small “caldera”. Miniature *Cryptomeria*, *Picea*, *Chamaecyparis*, *Pinus*, *Tsuga*, *Abies*, and *Juniperus* are all artfully tucked into the designed nooks and crannies of the pumice rockeries.

Other rock garden styles include container, tabletop, and mixed constructs using several types of rock. The various designs allow the aesthetic display of dozens of miniature and micro-mini conifers, some having growth rates as little as 1/8” per year.

A tufa (freshwater limestone) crevice garden was constructed using four pallets of tufa from British Columbia. Not expecting success, I planted some miniature conifers into this high pH rock garden. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that they thrived! Thus far, my list of conifers which do well in tufa include *Picea abies*, *Pinus banksiana*, *Juniperus communis*, *Chamaecyparis obtusa*, *Chamaecyparis pisifera* and *Abies lasiocarpa*. I plan to test other genera as I add to my conifer collection.

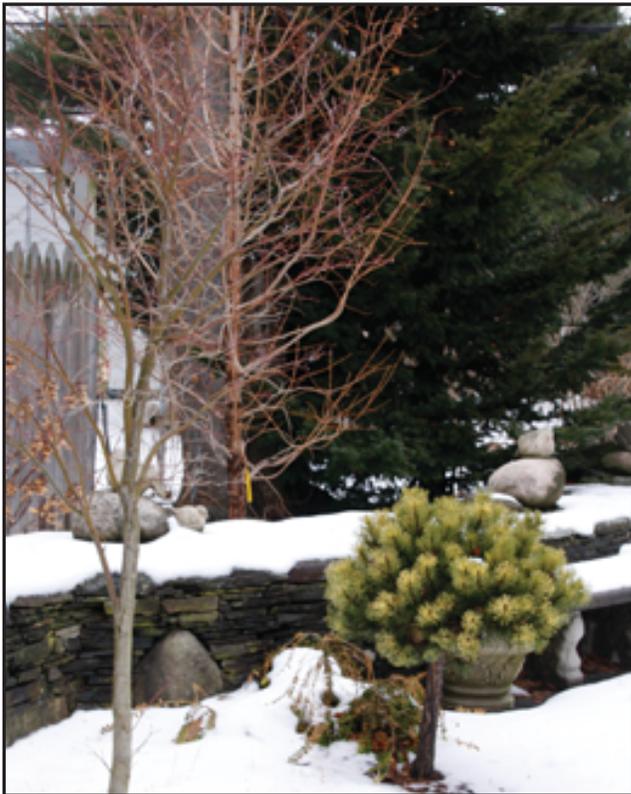


Tufa crevice garden featuring *Pinus banksiana* ‘Schoodic’.  
By Karen Kral

Surrounding 3 sides of the new lot is the “Great Wall of Kral”. This massive construct took me 1,500 hours spread over a year and a half to build. Ranging 3’-8’ in height and 3’-

4’ wide, the wall required 175, two-ton pallets of Pennsylvania moss rock and 30 yards of gravel. In summary, the new garden is a 14,000-foot walk-through rock garden, where one can get up close and personal with dozens of choice miniature and micro-mini conifers.

I believe all gardens need good sitting areas. In 2004, I had five wooden benches, two concrete benches and a pair of wood, red rocking chairs added. I discovered one of my rocking chairs collapsed after a visit by a garden club. One by one, the benches reached the danger point and were retired. They needed yearly maintenance and were expensive to keep replacing. A couple years ago I discovered “Polywood Furniture”. Constructed by our



A small section of the  
"Great Wall of Kral".

*By Karen Kral*

(Below) A sitting area with two  
red polywood rockers.

*By Karen Kral*



local Amish community, the polywood furniture is made using "lumber" formed from recycled plastic. The colors are brilliant and run through the material (no scratches or fading). Water can't soak in (no rot or moss), and the Amish offer top quality workmanship using stainless steel hardware. They seem indestructible, and the variety of styles being offered is growing every year.

Visitors to the 2014 gardens will find dozens of colorful benches, glider benches and rockers. I expect to see a lot more sitting and rocking!

No garden seems complete without statuary or ornamental displays. A few years ago I fell in love with hand blown, orange glass, mushroom lights. I may have had 5 or 6 in 2004. Now I have dozens. The manufacturer claims, based on my orders, that I may have the largest collection of these low voltage mushroom lights in the country. These lights are part of an elaborate low voltage system requiring nine, 600-watt transformers. I enjoy them because they are bright and colorful even during the day.



Orange glass mushroom lights  
in a winter landscape.  
*By Karen Kral*

New statuary has been added. In 2004 I had two sets of giant hypertufa mushrooms made by a local artisan. I now have 5 more sets, two of which reside in the new garden. There are new fairy, dragon and bird statues. Part of my design philosophy is to appeal to young people, as they will be our future gardeners. My 8-year-old niece, who lives next door, loves to romp through the garden visiting each fairy, dragon or giant mushroom. To be honest, I've even seen some adults do the same.

The "Secret Garden", which was installed in 1996 and was a very popular 2004 feature, required a complete reconstruction. I did not properly build the original retaining walls, and they were either collapsing or slumping. The plant selection was poor. The circular planting of arborvitae had grown so tall it felt like the bottom of a silo when you entered the garden. The outer perimeter was redone the fall of 2012 following correct dry wall construction techniques. The inner wall, a more elaborate construct, required an engineered retaining wall using pegged block. An ornamental veneer of local fieldstone was attached and ledges were installed to display potted plants and/or garden ornaments. A more diverse and better selection of plants should soon fill in and once again make the garden "secret". Instead of a circle of



Two sets of giant hypertufa mushrooms tucked into  
the conifer landscape. *By Karen Kral*



New dry stone veneer lining interior of the secret garden. *By Karen Kral*

tall arborvitae, I added fastigiate and pendulous yews. Intermixed are some select cultivars of *Acer palmatum*, *Picea orientalis*, *Tsuga canadensis* and *Styrax japonicus* ‘Carillon’. The lesson learned here is to do it right in the first place and you will only need to do it once.

The gardens entered their first infamous “10 year horizon” in 2004. The second will occur in 2014. Trees have been removed. Many conifers do not do well in heavy snow and ice

loads, especially arborvitae with multiple leaders. One tires of trying to keep them from breaking and splaying apart. Others have disease or pest issues such as red spider mite on *Picea glauca* and tip blights on some junipers. Some just grow too large. Fortunately, the palette of conifers not as prone to these conditions has increased dramatically over the past 20 years.

I’ve learned that pruning can sometimes turn “problem” trees into unique specimens. Cloud pruning an overgrown *Juniperus communis* not only kept it in bounds, but also added structural strength and an attractive wind swept appearance.

Lower patio featuring a cloud pruned *Juniperus communis*.  
*By Karen Kral*



Another lesson learned is to give some thought before removing an overgrown, but otherwise healthy and vigorous tree. The same tree in a large pot at a nursery may be worth several hundred dollars. Pruning the lower branches may be all that’s needed to get rid of the overgrowth problem. This opens up the trunk to light and you now have a new area to tuck in smaller



Unnamed witch's broom revealed after removing the original *Picea abies* 'Pygmaea'.  
By Karen Kral

me that I had an unnamed broom, 30" across, perched on a slightly curved, 6' caliper trunk. This was one unique specimen! The broom even looks healthier now that it was getting all the water, air and nutrients once used by the more vigorous 'Pygmaea'.

The 2004 garden featured cultivars of the usual shade-tolerant conifers; white pine, hemlock, Norway spruce and yews. Many of us enjoy pushing



*Picea omorika* 'Nana' in deciduous shade.  
By Jerry Kral

conifers or grasses. There may even be a "tree within your tree" just waiting to be discovered. A *Picea abies* 'Pygmaea' (dwarf Norway spruce) sporting a large witch's broom was seriously crowding its allotted space. I thought removal of the tree was the only solution. I began pruning out the lower branches of the 'Pygmaea'. This amounted to removal of over half the tree. As I began to cut branches from the broom, it dawned on

me that I had an unnamed broom, 30" across, perched on a slightly curved, 6' caliper trunk. This was one unique specimen! The broom even looks healthier now that it was getting all the water, air and nutrients once used by the more vigorous 'Pygmaea'. The 2004 garden featured cultivars of the usual shade-tolerant conifers; white pine, hemlock, Norway spruce and yews. Many of us enjoy pushing our planting zones. I enjoyed pushing shade tolerance. I learned that the palette of shade-tolerant conifers is larger and more diverse than usually thought. *Thujaopsis dolabrata* 'Nana' and 'Variegata', *Sciadopitys verticillata* 'Joe Kozey', *Picea orientalis* 'Gowdy', 'Shadow's Broom', and 'Skylands' and *Picea omorika* 'Nana' and 'Pendula' are just a few not usually considered for shade.

The 2008 acquisition allowed me to plant some of these same plants in full sun situations. Many surprises ensued. Some shade-grown plants had a softer more open growth habit. *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Snow' adopts a pyramidal growth habit in shade and a more globe-like habit



(Top) *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Snow' in sun.  
(Bottom) *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Snow' in shade. Photos by Jerry Kral

with multiple leaders in full sun. Its white variegation becomes subtler in shade, giving the tree a frosted tinge rather than full sun, bright white.

*Picea orientalis* looks great in shade with its clean, glossy needles. *Picea orientalis* 'Skylands' has a subtle golden glow in shade and "screams" yellow in full sun. I also learned that dwarfs and miniatures often succeed in shade where their full size cultivars fail. They seem to get light just at the right time to support their tiny growth rate and then "relax" as they harden-off in the shade. The miniature *Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'White Pygmy' does almost as well in shade as in sun. The habit is a bit more open, and the color a bit creamier in shade, but the plant is otherwise healthy and vigorous.

These are just a few examples of what visitors can expect to experience as they stroll through the gardens this fall. Almost everything will be labeled with special labels for plants with a story. There are several "the only example of" conifer seedlings, perennials and some deciduous trees. The hundreds of conifers add strong structure, color, and exciting contrasts in texture and form. The conifers give the gardens an exotic look not usually found in gardens just limited to herbaceous borders.



*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'White Pygmy' in sun. By Jerry Kral



*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'White Pygmy' in shade. By Jerry Kral