

A Tale of Two Conifers

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Seen here are the Colorado spruce (l.) and the white fir (r.).

Has a difficult gardening decision ever plagued you, such as having to select one of two very gorgeous conifers to cut down, so that the other tree could thrive? This dilemma confronted me when I observed that two of my trees were growing at top speed and that the branches of each tree were merging with those of the other, causing the lower branches of both to die. How did this happen?

In 2012, I removed some overgrown arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis*) close to my patio, leaving a large space to develop. I came up with the idea of dressing up the landscape with all blue conifers. I presented this idea to Susan Eyre, co-owner of Rich's Foxwillow Pines in Woodstock, IL, where blue conifers were plentiful in their inventory. Susan recommended two trees that

were each about five feet tall at the time. One was a Colorado spruce, *Picea pungens 'Bonny Blue'*. The other was a white fir cultivar with blue foliage, *Abies concolor 'Blue Cloak'*. I fell in love with these two trees and brought them home.

I knew nothing about spacing potentially 30-foot tall trees and just planted them where I thought they looked good. In addition, I added several more blue and blue-green trees, in order to create a special garden bed. As a longtime piano teacher and a lover of all genres of music, I named my special blue bed "Rhapsody in Blue". All that was missing was to pipe in Gershwin's music. I enjoyed relating this story to people when they came for garden tours. My "Rhapsody in Blue" always impressed visitors.



This is Dorothy Danforth's "Rhapsody in Blue" garden.



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Little did I suspect that the Colorado spruce and the white fir would zoom up to 20 plus feet tall in eight short years. Their branches mingled together to the point that some of them were dying. I knew something had to be done. My first thought was to donate the Colorado spruce to the Boerner Botanical Gardens in Hales Corners, WI, where I had given trees in the past. In addition, I contacted my friend, Bunny Raasch, a horticulturist, who spoke to several arborists. Their opinions varied.

One arborist thought that the roots had grown together and that moving the spruce would damage the fir, which, by the way, was my favorite conifer. Another arborist thought it was possible to trim the trees, but I believed that this would destroy their aesthetic beauty. To move the Colorado spruce would require a large tree-moving machine that could possibly damage the house since it had grown so close to the roof. The last suggestion, and the one hardest to accept, was to cut down the Colorado spruce and use it as a Christmas tree. This thought horrified me at first, but, eventually, I saw it as the ultimate solution.

I made inquiries about donating the tree to be used as a Christmas tree for an organization. Nothing came of that idea. On the spur of the moment, I asked one of my garden helpers to cut the tree down at ground level. When the tree fell onto the driveway, a helper saw that the top seven feet were undamaged. She took that part of the tree home on the top of her car. The other branches were cut and laid out by the driveway for visitors to pick up for decorations. The lovely 'Bonny Blue' used to have a special meaning. It filled me with joy every time I walked by it. Now, it would make a wonderful Christmas tree.

The lesson of this story is twofold. If you bring home two beautiful conifers that are four or five feet tall, be sure to check their growth habits before planting them too close to each other or too close to the house. It is difficult to give them up when they run into trouble.



Dorothy Danforth with her two trees.



A close-up of the branches of the two trees that had grown together.