



Standard bearer

Thuja occidentalis 'Smaragd' (Emerald Green arborvitae) shaped into spirals at Eshraghi Nursery. PHOTO COURTESY OF ESHRAGHI NURSERY

Thuja's longevity relies on dependability and versatility as well as innovation

BY JOSH LAPOINT

From coast to coast, arborvitae (*Thuja*) have earned their spot as one of the most widely produced and reliably sold staples in the nursery industry.

"It is a favorite of landscapers and re-wholesalers," said Megan McConnell of **Monrovia Nursery Company** (Farwest booth #17037; Dayton, Oregon). "*Thuja* is in the top three [genera] that we grow, so it is important to our production and sales."

Early roots

Arborvitae became a more popular plant in the postwar years because they were practical for the housing development patterns that emerged, according to Jay Sanders of **KG Farms** (Farwest booth #9029; Woodburn, Oregon).

"When suburban homes became a popular way of building," he said, "it became easier to plant as part of the fencing to give a delineation between you and your neighbor."

At that time, yards were larger than those of production homes built today.. Classic cultivars like *Thuja occidentalis* 'Pyramidalis', *T. o.* 'Nigra' (Dark Green American), *T. o.* 'Techny', and *T. o.* 'Zmatlik' added privacy and a level of sophistication to the landscapes.

There is still a market for the classics because of their extreme hardiness and tolerance for a snow-load that is common in the northern Midwest and Northeast.

Today, there are two arborvitae produced and sold in greater numbers than all the others:

T. o. 'Smaragd' (Latin for emerald) is more commonly known as Emerald Green arborvitae and was bred in Denmark in 1950. It gained popularity because of its soft texture, bright green color, and low maintenance.

Thuja Green Giant, is a cross between *Thuja plicata* (Western red cedar) and *Thuja standishii* (Japanese arborvitae). The Green Giant exploded in popularity because of its fast *plicata* growth rate, dense branching, and *standishii* hardiness.

"From a marketing perspective, people like what they know," Sanders said. "They fill two very specific roles with Green Giant being wider, taller, and faster growing while 'Smaragd' is perfect for that narrow, somewhat fast-growing role."

These two cultivars quickly became standouts thanks to the combination of capability, name recognition, and marketing.

Despite the formal appearance of so many of their cultivars, both *Thuja plicata* and *Thuja occidentalis* are natives to North America. Natalie Carmolli of **Spring Meadow Nursery** pointed out that their native roots are another reason why they've been so successful as a category.

Thuja occidentalis is native to eastern and central North America, while *plicata* is native to the West Coast. That is ➤

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likely why they have such great vitality and relatively little pest or disease pressure. Years and years of natural selection have now merged with years of dedicated breeding to create super resilient, high performing and beautiful arbs.

“We’re going to see more and more consumers wanting to add these unique colors and shapes to their gardens,” Carmolli added.

Pushing new growth

Although arborvitae are typically thought of as a straightforward, green hedging plant, there are many different growth habits, colors, and purposes within the category.

They may be columnar, pyramidal, dwarf globes, or even full-sized trees. Colors range from the orangish-red of Fire Chief™ Globe Arborvitae (*T. o.* ‘Congabe’ PP19009) to the bright gold of Anna’s Magic Ball® (*T. o.* ‘Anna van Vloten’ PP



Ember Waves® Western Arborvitae (*Thuja* × ‘MonPin’ PP25363) has bright yellow new growth maturing to bright green. PHOTO COURTESY OF MONROVIA NURSERY COMPANY

25868), all the way to the green of Mr. Bowling Ball Arborvitae.

Roby Babcock of **Iseli Nursery** (Farwest booth #19037; Boring, Oregon) pointed out that even exists the Blue

Korean arborvitae called *T. koraiensis* ‘Glaucua’. With arborvitae, every color, shape, and style is possible, and this gives breeders and landscape architects an open field for their creativity.

While some breeders are trying to improve on classics in hopes of finding the next Green Giant or Emerald Green, others are more interested in creating the next specimen or accent piece.

Accents like Fire Chief have rocked the market and earned their spot in landscape designs nationwide. However, for every Fire Chief, there are many others that did not gain traction either because of market acceptance or performance.

“It takes a lot of resources to breed a new plant and get it to launch, and be successful,” said Andrea Fields of **Eshraghi Nursery** (Farwest booth #12025; Hillsboro, Oregon). It requires years of breeding and trials, dedicated land, attention to detail, careful recordkeeping, and then strong execution in production, marketing, and sales.

“From the time you have the cutting to when you can sell it, you’ve committed 18-36 months and you’re hoping the customers will want that new variety,” Fields said. “It’s an investment.”

Sanders agreed. “The whole deciding factor on new introductions is whether or not it will hold up to the cold hardiness and be accepted by the marketplace,” he said. “It’s ultimately up to the con-

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sumer to make the plant successful in the long-term.”

The nursery industry invests heavily in promoting new introductions. “Education is a key component,” Babcock said. “One thing that I enjoy with my job is showing people the full range of options out there. It’s fun.”

Filling out nicely

Breeders have had great success with arborvitae, and market demand remains strong. This all but assures there will be continued innovation in the category.

“We’re always coming up with new varieties,” Spring Meadow’s Carmolli said, “which is a good indicator of their value to our program.”

Spring Meadow is introducing a brand-new cultivar that is an offspring of *T. o. ‘Nigra’* and is hardy to zone 2, where Green Giant cannot survive. “We’re calling this

one Sasquatch™ Dark Green Arborvitae [*T. o. ‘V32’* PPAF],” Carmolli said.

Many introductions like this are improvements to existing cultivars. An example might be *T. o. ‘Golden Blush’*, which is a golden pyramidal with resistance to the burning that is so common with golden arborvitae. Others redefine the category. Iseli Nursery has released *T. o. ‘Kelsoki’s Spire’*, which is a narrow upright that presents more like an upright hinoki cypress.

Shaped by demand

As breeders and growers look towards the future, they have noticed three key trends:

- **New construction often** comes with smaller lot sizes.
- **Consumers prefer lower upkeep**, low maintenance plants with increased drought, heat, and cold tolerance.
- **The market** is also moving away from

the traditional B&B, field-grown material towards lighter, container-grown stock.

The National Association of Homebuilders keeps records of the lot size distribution of new single-family detached homes. (By definition, this excludes condos and townhomes, which are already on the rise.)

From 2010 to 2023, the percentage of new construction under 0.16 acre, which is about 7,000 square feet, increased from 27% in 2010 to 40% in 2023. Meanwhile, new construction at 0.21-0.25 acre dropped from 15% in 2021 to 7% in 2023.

While there are underlying economic factors at play, the raw data supports the experience of nursery professionals with respect to new residential construction and retail garden center sales.

“If you have a lot with 4’ on the side of your house before your fence ... the ➤

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options are pretty limited,” said Mikaela Eaton of **Eschenfelder Farms** (Farwest booth #14056; Canby, Oregon).

The second trend is a transition towards low-maintenance lifestyles and landscapes as younger generations become homeowners.

“Low maintenance is often a point of entry for arborvitae,” Monrovia’s McConnell said. She noted that customers rightly expect these plants to be relatively carefree. Most cultivars are naturally uniform in their growth habit, and they don’t encounter much pest or disease pressure once established. “People really don’t want a lot of upkeep,” Babcock said.

One other trend that growers have noticed is the move from traditional B&B field growing to more container production. “Although there are more inputs on container production which makes it more expensive, the end result is more palatable



Spring Meadow is introducing Sasquatch™ Dark Green Arborvitae (*T. o.* ‘V32’ USPP) a brand-new cultivar that is an offspring of *T. o.* ‘Nigra’ and is hardy to zone 2, where Green Giant cannot survive. PHOTO COURTESY OF SPRING MEADOW NURSERY

than a heavy [plant]” Babcock said.

Container-grown arborvitae naturally weigh less than field-grown counterparts. This makes them easier for customers to handle, while reducing shipping costs.

Growing beyond

The market for arborvitae is resilient, because they are low cost, high performing staples.

“As long as there are new homes »

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Primo® Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* Primo® ('IsiPrim')) has compact textural foliage and a naturally sculpted shape. PHOTO COURTESY OF ISEL NURSERY

being built and new commercial construction taking place, I think the market will continue to be strong," Sanders said.

McConnell agreed. "There are always other hedge plants that can take some of the market share — Cherry Laurels, for example — but arbs have the advantage of being hardy while popular broad-leaf shrub plants often aren't," she said.

"Anywhere you go, Ace, Home Depot, Lowes, even grocery stores like Fred Meyer, you're going to see arborvitae sold to homeowners as well," Eaton said.

But that doesn't mean you should stake your business solely on it.

"While I don't think arborvitae are going anywhere, I do think there's a limit so if someone is changing their entire business to produce arborvitae, that's probably not a good idea," she said.

Fields agreed that arbs are important to the product mix but it's a balancing

act. "You could be growing higher-priced items in the same space," she said. "That's a decision each grower has to make."

Overall, the future of arborvitae looks great and there are many interesting cultivars to look for when perusing an availability or shopping at a local garden center. Nurseries around the country may take an interest in carrying the blue *T. k.* 'Glauc'. Landscape architects may design more *T. o.* 'Kelsoki Spire' specimen into high end installations. There may even be a Sasquatch siting! As the category continues to develop, arborvitae promise to be an integral part of our industry moving forward. ©

Joshua LaPoint owns Standard Nursery and has a passion for writing as well as plants. Contact him at Josh@StandardNurseryCompany.com.



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