



Yews

Taxus spp.

Alex X. Niemiera, Professor, School of Plant and Environmental Sciences, Virginia Tech

Summary:

Foliage: 1 inch long needles; evergreen

Height: Depends on cultivar

Spread: Depends on cultivar

Shape: Depends on cultivar

Main features: Yews are slow-growing evergreen conifers. There are three main species of yews that are used in the landscape, English yew (*Taxus baccata*), Japanese yew (*T. cuspidata*) and Anglojap yew (*T. ×media*). In the nursery and landscape trades, these yews are almost always represented by cultivars (the straight species are rarely, if ever, available). Their cultivars range from small (medium in many years) tree forms to low-growing shrubs. Yews have an absolute requirement for well-drained soils. Poorly drained soil (such as clay soils or soils in low areas) is the “kiss of death” to yews. These species, especially when sheared, offer a very formal appearance due to their dark green, symmetrical solid canopy. Because of its extreme toxicity to humans, yews should not be planted around playgrounds or other areas where children (or livestock) may be tempted to eat the foliage, bark, or seeds; the red fleshy portion surrounding the seed, the aril, is not poisonous. Deer relish yew foliage without any ill effect – too bad. Since their culture and landscape functions are very similar, they will be presented collectively in the Plant Needs, Functions, and Care Sections. Cultivars for each species will be described in the Additional Information Section.

Plant Needs:

Zone: English Yew zones 6 to 7; Japanese yew and Anglojap yew zones 4 to 7

Light: Full sun to shady locations (full shade will result in sparse plants)

Moisture: Average to dry

Soil type: Well-drained soil is an absolute requirement

pH range: Acid

Functions:

Yews can serve as focal points, in mass, hedges, barriers, border plantings, foundation plants, wind breaks, and topiaries. These species, especially when sheared, offer a very formal appearance due to their dark green, symmetrical solid canopy.

Care:

Yews need to be planted in well-drained soils. Poorly drained soil (such as clay soils or soils in low areas) is the “kiss of death” to yews. Yews are very tolerant of pruning. Old yews can be rejuvenated by cutting into wood with foliage but it will take several years for the plant to re-grow and assume an acceptable appearance. Due its toxicity to humans, yews should not be planted around playgrounds or other areas where children (or livestock) may be tempted to eat the foliage, bark, or seeds; the red fleshy portion surrounding the seed, the aril, is not poisonous. Deer relish yew foliage without any ill effect – too bad.

Additional Information:

Here are some notable cultivars (a mere subset) for each species, many other cultivars exist.

English yew (*Taxus baccata*)

'Fastigiata' (Stricta') fastigate (narrow erect form)

'Repandens' very attractive wide-spreading, much wider than tall (to about 4 feet tall); dark green foliage; hardy in zone 5

'Watnong Gold' low-growing form with striking yellow foliage in spring that fades during summer (but still yellowish)

Japanese yew (*T. cuspidata*)

'Capitata' conical form; can grow to 50 feet tall

'Densa' dwarf form that will mature to about 4 feet tall and 8 feet wide

'Emerald Spreader'™ low-growing form (about 2.5 feet tall) with lustrous dark green foliage; hardy in zone 4

'Green Wave' low-mounded wide form with arching branches; about 4 feet tall and 8 feet wide

'Nana' (var. *nana*) slow-growing spreading form with dark green needles

Anglojap yew (*T. ×media*)

'Brownii' upright vase shape, usually wider than tall

'Chadwickii' low-growing (about 4 feet tall), wider than tall

'Densiformis' dense compact form that is twice as wide as tall (about 4 feet tall)

'Hatfieldii' dense wide conical form

'Tauntonii' wide-spreading form, about 4 feet tall; foliage will not winter burn in zone 4; tolerates heat of zone 7

'Wardii' wide-growing, much wider than tall (old plant would be 6 feet tall and more than 15 feet wide)

