

Homes & Property | Outdoors

Alex Mitchell



CONIFERS are back in fashion. But banish thoughts of twee cones or leylandii hedges, the trend now is for small, rugged-looking pine trees that evoke a hillside in the Med rather than a Seventies suburban rockery.

They bring wildness and romance to any spot and are particularly suited to roof terraces and balconies where they shrug off the wind, thrive in containers, don't need too much water and make a welcome contrast to the hard lines of urban planning with their sculptural stems and strong, evergreen forms.

Designer **Stephen Woodhams** planted the vast roof terrace of The Penthouse at Riverwalk, the curvaceous scheme of swish flats on the curve of the Thames at Millbank opposite M16. "We had a huge backlash against conifers after the Seventies," he says. "People associated them with leylandii hedge wars between neighbours. But now we're re-evaluating them. They look great year round and work really well with other plants."

Leading designers are going mad for the dwarf mountain pine – *Pinus mugo* – and Walter pine, or *Pinus sylvestris Watereri*, both ideal for small gardens as they won't get too big. Low-growing hummocks of mugo look beautiful against pale gravel and soften the edges of paving. *Watereri* soon forms a multi-stem umbrella shape that makes a great sculptural feature. They both look at home in the English climate, yet at the same time call to mind romantic, dry, resinous coastal hills of the Med.

Pine specialist Philip Nieuwoudt of New Wood Trees wholesale nursery in Totnes, Devon, supplies many top nurseries. "In the Seventies people planted their whole gardens evergreen, like gardens on steroids," he says. "Now we realise you have to space them with other looser planting so they are part of the design rather than dominating it."

On the roof of the Plimsoll Building in King's Cross, designer **Emily Erlam** has done just this, creating a beautifully shrubby Mediterranean fantasy-scape using *Pinus mugo* and *Pinus sylvestris*



Mine's a pine

Add conifers for romance and to soften London's hard edges

MARIANNE MAJERUS/SGD AWARDS



Stunningly structural: a Walter pine on a balcony at Riverwalk, Millbank

Watereri as the structural elements, then surrounding them with swathes of *Gaura* and lavender, hummocks of *Santolina* and thyme, and trailing plants such as Mexican fleabane, creeping rosemary and blue rock bindweed. The



Top of the tree: cloud-pruned pines enhance magnificent Thames views at The Penthouse, Riverwalk, Millbank. The garden design is by Stephen Woodhams

design, which recently won the Roof Garden prize at the Society of Garden Designers awards, makes you feel like you're on holiday even on a grey London day. "The great thing about pines is that they are so sculptural and natu-

ral in form and offset the brutality of the urban landscapes," says Erlam. "On roofs it's all about the horizon, how you break this geometric architecture of the city. Pines do this really well and naturalise the look of the place." Erlam

Inspired by the East: Matt Keightley's award-winning garden design for Tyre Hill House, Worcestershire, with conifers set off by pale grey gravel

sees the current revival taking its inspiration from the Mediterranean and also from Japan, where constricted space led to a passion for worshipping and manipulating the form of a tree.

The East inspired Matt Keightley in another SGD Awards winner this year, Tyre Hill House, an elegant sweep of gravel and water in which the rounded domes of *Pinus sylvestris Watereri* and sculptural *Pinus sylvestris Bonsai* up to 8ft tall are set off beautifully against the pale grey gravel. Add in soft mounds of yew and it's a calming tapestry of green against a backdrop of the Malvern Hills. The cool minimalism of the space, its sharp paving, geometric pools and concrete furniture is brought to life by these low-spreading, naturalistic shapes. Magnolias and irises provide the seasonal changes.

For those of us with small gardens who pine for a bit of the action, you can either splash out on a mature tree or buy small and wait for them to develop, pruning off the bottom branches to "raise the crown" and show off the shape better. They love containers since they are so slow growing and won't get too big. Give them lots of sun and a free-draining compost. Even a small balcony would gain some romance with Walter pine and *Pinus mugo* – try Nana for a particular dwarfing variety. Combine them with some Erlam-inspired wafty planting, sit back and dream of the Med.

SUPPLIERS

- **Burncoose Nurseries:** burncoose.co.uk; *Pinus mugo*, 2-3L pot, £10.50
- **Architectural plants:** architecturalplants.com; *Pinus mugo Brevifolia*, 45L pot, £275
- **Paramount Plants:** paramountplants.co.uk has a wide range of mature *Pinus mugo* and *Pinus sylvestris Watereri*, priced from £90. Browse at the nursery in Crews Hill, Enfield, or look online

COMMISSION A DESIGNER

- **Stephen Woodhams:** visit stephenwoodhams.com
- **Emily Erlam:** visit erlamstudio.com
- **Matt Keightley:** visit rosebanklandscaping.co.uk

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