Fountains & Weepers

Plants with a cascading element are invaluable in a garden. Careful selection and placement are essential to exploiting this shape.
Christopher Lloyd

THERE IS AN OLD SAYING, "Laugh and the world laughs with you; weep and you weep alone," the second part of which applies well to weeping trees and shrubs. If mixed up with other kinds of plants, their lowest branches get lost among the herbage. To appreciate a weeper fully, it needs to be seen in its entirety, standing clear of contestants for our attention.

The very distinct shapes of weeping shrubs and trees can be conveniently divided between the fountains, which have an upright habit but weeping branches, and the weepers, which want to hang down vertically from first to last and often require help to get them off the ground initially.

Among the most satisfying of the **fountains** in my garden is the weeping silver lime, *Tilia* 'Petiolaris' (USDA Zone 4). It will grow to 100 feet tall (mine, which I planted 50 years ago, is already about half that height), but its branches weep naturally down to the ground. The leaves have long petioles, so they hang this way and that, often displaying their silver-felted undersides. It is one of the last of the limes to flower, waiting until late July or early August, and the delicious scent of its blooms spreads far and wide.

Many conifers have the characters we are looking for. Brewer's spruce, *Picea breweriana* (Zone 6), is the rarest of the spruces in the wild, being confined to a few localities in the Siskiyou Mountains of northern California and southern Oregon. Best as a young tree, its horizontal side branches are hung with a vertical sheet of branchlets, which may be six to eight feet long.

Another western United States species, native to the Cascade Mountains, is the yellow cypress *Chamaecyparis nootkatensis* (Zone 4), grown in its 'Pendula' form, in which the horizontal side branches make a curtain of slender branches several feet long. I am told that in the wild this is often the most common manifestation of the species.

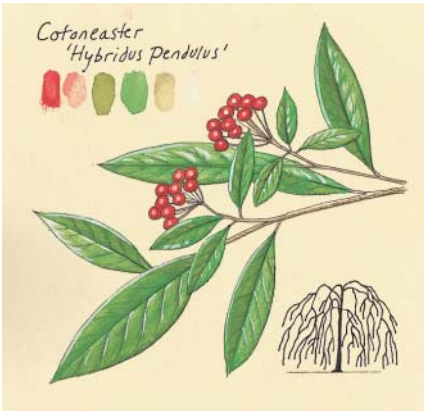
I must bring in the Western Himalayan spruce, *Picea smithiana* (Zone 7), because it makes such a wonderful landscape impression in that area (I admired it

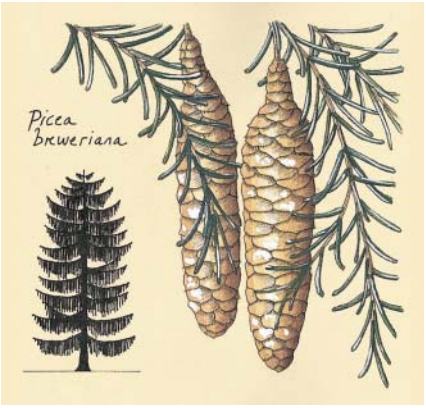
Where to Plant Them

Fountain and weeping plants are primarily valued for their sculptural forms—in summer and even more in winter. The effect they contribute may be intensified by placing them rather forward in a border, or against the contrasting upright forms of many conifers and fastigiate shrubs or trees.

Most fountains and weepers are susceptible to training, and so may be used to form arches to soften the corners of high buildings and visually reduce their height, or even to drape fences and fan out, espalier-fashion, against walls.
—Ed.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SIMON DORRELL





The branches of a number of conifers such as Brewer's spruce hang in graceful curtains. Weepers such as the cotoneaster must be either trained into a tree-like form or grafted to an upright stem.

in Kashmir)—a tall, dark tree, though with bright green young shoots and long, weeping side shoots, much like Brewer's spruce.

The golden weeping willow's correct name and identity have been endlessly argued over by botanists. The current preferred name is *Salix alba* 'Tristis' (Zone 2). Everyone knows it, and it is one of the most popular of all our trees, often planted in quite unsuitable positions, close to a house. As a landscape feature, overhanging a lake, it has no match, with its golden color in earliest spring. In Japan, I have seen it effectively pollarded on an annual basis, where it was lining the two sides of a city canal. In their hot and humid summers, it was able to make enough young growth, with young wands sprouting at all levels.

Turning to the **weepers**, which need our help, the weeping silver pear, *Pyrus salicifolia* (Zone 5) seems not to have a nonweeping equivalent. It must definitely be helped aloft, by tying a young growth or two to a long pole, centrally placed. With its silver-gray, willowlike leaves it is endlessly popular. I think it vastly overrated, but who am I to dissent with the masses?

One of my favorite weeping trees, when it is old and full of character, is the ash *Fraxinus excelsior* 'Pendula' (Zone 5), but if grafted low, it makes no more than a dome, rather like a tea cozy. The stock needs to be run up as high as possible before the weeping portion is top-grafted. You can train branches upwards yourself, when they are young, but it is hard work. Old weeping ashes develop an open frame of twisted branches and are even more beautiful when naked in winter than when in leaf.

The weeping blue cedar, *Cedrus atlantica* 'Glauca Pendula' (Zone 6), is deservedly popular and makes a change from the normal glaucous types. *Sequoiadendron giganteum* 'Pendulum' (Zone 6) is a quite extraordinary aberration from the normal Big Tree of California, hardly a tree at all but a kind of archway, popular trained as such and forming a canopy and frame for wedding couples photographed beneath it. I was amazed and amused to see this use in the VanDusen Botanical Garden in Vancouver.

Young's weeping birch, *Betula pendula* 'Youngii' (Zone 2), makes no leading shoot. It should either be grafted high on a common birch seedling or have some of its own growth trained and tied, as with the weeping pear. It can be a beautiful garden feature, improving with age.

The weeping cherry, *Prunus* ×*subhirtella* 'Pendula' (Zone 5), generally grows no higher than it was grafted in the British climate, and is more of a bush than a tree. It typically has small white flowers, although there are a number of richer pink color forms. In its native Japan it builds up into a tree, with twisted branches, and is much seen in temple grounds and in other public places where (in my opinion) the planting of ornamental cherries close to buildings is rather overdone, when you consider that their flowering season is short.

Training a Weeper to Stand

Left to their own devices, weepers will creep over the ground. But their most valuable form usually is upright and then down-spilling. To assume this perfect form, they will need your help.

First, determine the height the plant should be before it cascades to the ground. Then go to a building supply store and buy a length of Rebar—concrete reinforcing rod—cut to that height plus two feet extra. Both you and your plant may have to live with this stake for a long time, so, though it will be attractive when rusted, you may choose to paint it black.

Insert the stake two feet into the ground, and establish the plant just at its side. (If the plant will be seen primarily from one side, place it so the stake will be behind the main stem.) Trim off all side growths, leaving only a central shoot. Tie this "leader" firmly upright with organic twine. Check the twine periodically to be sure that it is not strangling the young plant. Trim off any side growths along the trunk.

When the central stem reaches the top of the pole, snip it to encourage branching. Snip the resulting branches at roughly six inches until a full head has built up. The result is a "standard weeper," which may then be allowed to cascade gracefully to the ground.

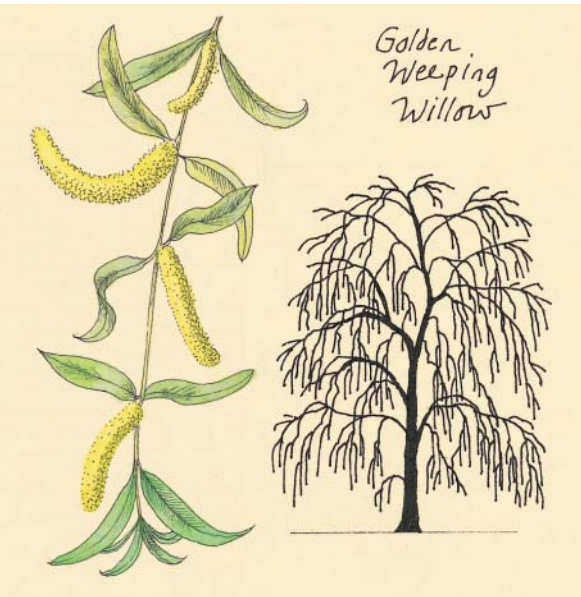
—Ed.

The normally prostrate cotoneaster, *C.* 'Hybridus Pendulus' (Zone 6), is popular in small gardens, running up to six feet or so and making a cascade of colorful berries down to ground level. To get it up there in the first place it is often bud-grafted on top of a *C. frigidus* seedling, which forms the stem, or, even more satisfactory in the end, budded at ground level and the scion itself run up to form the stem.

The Kilmarnock willow (Zone 4), only three feet or so tall but with branches hanging vertically, is derived from the goat (or pussy) willow, *Salix caprea*, and is popularly featured in spring flower shows, covered with pussy-tail catkins. Puzzlingly, it can be either male (whose pussies are yellow with pollen) or female, the latter now officially named 'Weeping Sally' by British plantsman Roy Lancaster.

Standard fuchsias are made by training a normal fuchsia stem so that it makes a trunk, then sprays outwards into a head at the top. Prostrate fuchsias, such as the pink-and-green-leaved cultivar 'Tom West' or the golden-leaved 'Autumnale' (both Zone 8), can be trained likewise. From a height their prostrate habit will then become weeping.

An element of arching or weeping can be seen in many flowering shrubs when the stems are laden with and bowed down by blossom. You see this in spring-flowering spiraeas and deutzias, for instance, and later in butterfly bush, *Buddleia alternifolia* (Zone 6), which is often grown as a standard for that reason.



It makes arching ropes of scented mauve blossoms.

Even a herbaceous perennial like *Helianthus salicifolius* (Zone 4), which is grown largely for its fresh green foliage, has a weeping element. The six-foot stems are upright but the leaves weep in graceful curves.

All in all, the appearance of a garden is dependent on a weeping element in its plants in many different ways at different levels.

OUR FAVORITE WEEPERS

IT SOMETIMES seems that almost every deciduous and evergreen tree has a weeping form. Canny nurserymen and devoted plantsmen have propagated many of these forms and made them readily available. Here are a few of our favorites. All make superb freestanding specimens, but also interesting espaliers.

Evergreens

Thread-needle Japanese False Cypress (*Chamaecyparis pisifera* 'Filifera'): One of the most adaptable of all evergreens. Sun or light shade, heat and drought tolerant. To 15 feet, but may be sheared. Forms a cone of threadlike needles like frozen green rain. Zone 4.

Sargent's Weeping Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis* 'Pendula'): A noble, weeping dwarf form of our native hemlock, reaching 15 feet and as wide after many years. Always an authoritative presence in the landscape. Very shade tolerant, but resents pollution. Zone 3.

Cole's Prostrate Hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis* 'Cole's Prostrate'): Prostrate indeed, usually seen creeping over boulders in the rock garden. But fast and elegant when trained to Rebar, and—as it is also shade tolerant—a very useful dramatic accent in small, dark city gardens. Zone 4.

Deciduous Trees

Weeping Japanese Katsura (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum* 'Pendulum'): A graceful, fast-growing small tree to 20 feet; a "haystack," though susceptible to pruning into a weeping, treelike form. Blue-green, rounded, 2-inch leaves, turning rich gold in autumn, when they smell of ripe fruit. Requires ample moisture. Zones 4–8.

Weeping Redbud (*Cercis canadensis* 'Pendula'): A rare form of the native American redbud, with branches dripping to the ground. Purple flowered, for sadly, no white-flowered form has yet been found. Must be trained on Rebar when stems are young and flexible, for they are brittle as glass. Full sun to part shade. Zone 6.

Weeping European Beech (*Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula'): Weeping certainly, but also, according to Mike Dirr (*Dirr's Hardy Trees and Shrubs*), "dipping, diving, arching and permutating in all directions." A tree of great distinction when freestanding, but may be trained effectively against a tall building, or used as an espalier. Zone 5. —*Ed.*