



# Spikes & Spires

Vertical plants provide excitement and cohesion for the border. The author discusses some favorites and their uses. Christopher Lloyd

Large or small, plants of this shape are reaching for the sky. “We may be earthbound,” they are saying, “but the sky’s our real home,” and just to see them gives us a lift too.

A STRONG, UPWARD THRUST is essential in our gardens at every level, and never more so than in a mixed border setting, where much that is planted for its floral contribution is growing on plants of amorphous habit. A border that depends entirely on color and disregards shape is never satisfactory. Spires will hold it together better than anything.

We notice spikes and spires more than any other shape, whether in the garden or as landscape features. In the Mediterranean region, the fastigate spires of **cypresses**, *Cupressus sempervirens* in an upright form, create whole landscapes, contrasting signally with the flat-topped umbrella pines. In colder climates

we resort to hardier conifers, notably **junipers**. The pencil outlines of the dreadful *Juniperus scopulorum* ‘Skyrocket’ are the vertical accent cliché. They are planted symmetrically as corner pieces. Inevitably, one or more of them will let you down, being split apart by the weight of snow or refusing to grow at the same speed as the rest. There is a lesson here: Do not plant symmetrically. You can easily suggest the motif you are aiming at—a frame for a vista, for instance—with a few accents, irregularly spaced and without being slavishly geometrical.

Neither are we forced to use conifers. The small-leaved **holly**, *Ilex aquifolium* ‘Hascombensis’ (USDA Zone 7), is easily trained as a spire. *Eucryphia* × *Nymansensis* ‘Nymansay’ (Zone 8) also responds to training, and it will flower abundantly in July–August—if it is hardy for you. Some fastigate forms of otherwise normal round-topped trees have clumsy outlines and show a lot of woody stem (the double pink cherry, *Prunus* ‘Amanogawa’, is a real horror in this regard, becoming steadily uglier every year). But one of my favorites for my climate is the fastigate form of our native **oak**, *Quercus robur* ‘Fastigiata’ (Zone 5).

**Foxgloves**, color strains of *Digitalis purpurea*, make a lively vertical feature. They flower in early summer, however, and are soon past. Many **mulleins** (*Verbascum* spp.) go on for far longer. One I especially like is the biennial *V. olympicum*, which flowers for at least six weeks in high summer. If there are subsequent rains, it will often surprise you by carrying a second flush. This mullein rises to eight feet, branching toward the top into an imposing candelabrum of yellow blossom. (*Verbascum* flowers do wilt under a hot sun, but they will recover overnight.) Because its habit does not block the view, I site it in any part of a deep, one-sided border—front, middle, or back. This is a far more exciting arrangement than placing all your plants with tallest at the back, shortest at the front.

## HARDY SPIKES AND SPIRES: THE GARDENER’S FAVORITES

**DECIDUOUS SHRUB:** *Rhamnus frangula* ‘Columnaris’: Tallhedge. Vigorous, upright, columnar, to 15 feet. Broad, shiny, oval, dark-green leaves. Used as a hedge but interesting as a single, vertical accent. Prolific self-seeder. Cheap.

**EVERGREEN SHRUB:** *Taxus × media* ‘Stricta’: Upright hybrid yew.

Broadly columnar, slowly reaching eight feet. A hardy (Zone 5) substitute for the elegant Irish yew, hardy to Zone 7.

**DECIDUOUS TREE:** *Fagus sylvatica* ‘Fastigiata’: Columnar European beech. Doubly choice in the bronze-leaved form, ‘Dawyck Purple’. Elegantly columnar, oval with age; to 40 feet.

What I have said about not blocking the view applies also to **hollyhocks**, *Alcea rosea*. Given a strain with near-black flowers, it is almost essential, for the sake of seeing the flowers, to have the plants at the border's margin. Another delightful way to use hollyhocks is in the cracks of an extensive flat area of paving. They will people it. We use **teasels**, *Dipsacus ful-lonum* (once used by fullers for teasing wool), in these kinds of ways, too. It makes a six-foot, sparsely branching candelabrum of prickly oval flower heads. It has a great presence, even as a dark brown skeleton after flowering, and we leave some to overwinter in many parts of the garden. It is a biennial and also a great self-seeder (which will mean a weed to those gardeners who can't abide the thought of a plant having a will of its own), so we only leave a few that have placed themselves in key positions, out of the hundreds that we uncomplainingly remove.

The **foxtail lilies** (*Eremurus* spp.) rise from five to nine feet (according to variety) in early summer and have ropes of star-shaped flowers, which are most imposing. But they do want rather careful placing. As their leaves have already withered by the time they flower, they should be sited where that will not show. You also need to think how you will fill the gap they leave, on becoming dormant, in high summer. I find that the perennial *Verbascum chaixii* (Zone 4), with spires in yellow or white, is a good choice.

For out-and-out strength of outline in key positions, one of the varieties of *Yucca gloriosa* (Zone 7) may answer your needs. Not only are its evergreen leaves stiff and spiky, but its inflorescence of creamy bells, borne in a massive, branching candelabrum, rises to six feet or more in summer, sometimes in autumn. To emphasize the swordlike motif, you could, as my father did (he was architecturally inclined), accent them with bearded irises, whose sword leaves are upright and regimented.

All the **red hot pokers**, of the genus *Kniphofia*, ranging in height from two to eight feet (for example *K. uvaria* 'Nobilis', Zone 5), have upwardly thrusting flower spikes. Between them, their flowering covers a long season, but some, individually, are in bloom for a mere couple of weeks. The one mentioned above is among the most dramatic and satisfactory for my purposes, but a totally uncompromising shade of orange. You need a strong stomach.

Some of the ornamental **grasses** are great allies, especially *Calamagrostis x acutiflora* 'Karl Foerster'. This flowers gracefully at six feet in early July, being purplish then, but the flower spikes subsequently stiffen and bleach until, by fall, they form an upright rod, which lasts right through the winter and is a great landscape feature. I do not cut them down until late March.

Another favorite upright grass in my garden, this one for foliage, is *Miscanthus sinensis* 'Strictus', which grows to seven feet. The leaves arch and are cross-banded in yellow. There are several of these zebra grasses, growing to different heights and more or less vase-shaped, so you need to be careful which you get.

Some **bamboos** contrive to be tall and compact but have a stately presence. Whether they run frantically depends very much on your climate. A hot, humid summer tends to spell trouble. One of the least troublesome in my experience is *Semiarundinaria fastuosa*. I dare not suggest a height, which varies so much according to climate, but it is a great bamboo. ♡

The yucca's spiky leaves are topped by a spire of blooms. The narrow profile of *Calamagrostis* 'Karl Foerster' is a striking accent from summer through winter.



**CONIFER:** *Picea omorika*: Serbian spruce. Narrowly pyramidal to spirelike, to 50 feet, with distinctive short, drooping and then upturned branches. The most elegant of the spruces.

**ANNUAL:** *Antirrhinum majus*: Snapdragon. A tender perennial (USDA Zone 8) usually grown as an annual. A real "can't do better" plant. Widely available.

**BIENNIAL:** *Digitalis ferruginea*: Rusty foxglove. Vigorous, producing three-foot stems with rust-brown tubular flowers in midsummer of second year. Naturalizes freely.

**PERENNIAL:** *Cimicifuga simplex* 'Hillside Black Beauty': Autumn snakeroot. Maroon-leaved, producing six-foot spires of fringed, fragrant white flowers in early autumn. Superior to 'Brunette'.