

## LET'S GET GROWING

### Plant Growth Habits

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In horticultural terms, the word “habit” refers to the shape or outline a plant takes, as well as other obvious physical characteristics about the plant, and its function in the landscape. Learning about a plant’s habit is helpful when shopping for plants, and can help us avoid disappointment later. Additional factors to consider such as space, sunlight, drainage, and traffic flow can make a difference in how a plant grows best in our yard.

Genetics is certainly responsible for how a plant looks and behaves. A plant’s aesthetic appeal and function are reasons plant breeders develop new varieties every year. According to University of Illinois Extension, American yards are getting smaller, so plant breeders are developing more dwarf varieties for consumers ([extension.illinois.edu](http://extension.illinois.edu)). Choosing plants with a practical size, striking color, and interesting texture are just as important for the outside of our home as choosing the right sofa for our living room.

Use the description on the plant tag to guide your search and find clues about growth rate and mature size of the plant. Take note of sunlight and water requirements, as these are crucial to the overall health of the plant. Ask nursery staff about information you can’t find on the tag. Terms such as columnar, pillar, or pyramidal will indicate a tall, narrow habit, while globe, rounded, or spherical will describe a circular, or ball shape. For example, Sky Pencil Holly (*Ilex Renata* ‘Sky Pencil’) is a “pencil-thin” evergreen shrub with an “ultra narrow growth” habit, making it useful as a specimen or focal point for a small corner, as a narrow hedge, or privacy screen. Dwarf Pencil Point Juniper (*Juniperus communis* ‘Compressa’) reaches only 36” tall and 24” wide. Several of these narrow-profile evergreens planted near a chain link fence can give the illusion of privacy and height without completely blocking the view beyond. Mr. Bowling Ball Arborvitae (*Thuja Occidentalis* ‘Bobozam’) is just that—a “naturally rounded dwarf (evergreen) shrub...useful as a low hedge” ([www.monrovia.com](http://www.monrovia.com)). If you seek more color, never fear! Fire Chief Arborvitae (*Thuja Occidentalis* ‘Congabe’) sports auburn-red feathery foliage, is slow-growing, and blends well with other warm-toned plants.

Upright, arching, lateral, weeping, natural, open, and dense describe the branching patterns of trees and bushes. A vase-shaped habit is common for street trees which have few or no lower branches, and display a broad canopy (or upper foliage “umbrella”). Cone or conical-shaped describes a teardrop shape for both evergreen and deciduous shrubs and trees. New varieties combine a compact dwarf size with the qualities of the taller version of these shrubs.

Spread refers to how wide the plant’s boundaries may eventually reach. Blue Rug Juniper (*Juniperus horizontalis*) is a steely-blue creeping evergreen, often used on steep banks, as ground cover, or tumbling over a stone wall. The Latin name gives away its horizontal nature. Flowering Red Dogwood trees (*Cornus Florida*) display lateral, natural branching, not to be

confused with Red Twig Dogwood (*Cornus sericea*), which is a bush with upright red branches which are especially striking in the winter landscape.

Location is just as important for long-term success of a plant as its physical characteristics. Choose a plant with a habit which will function well in your landscape. To situate your new plant where it can most successfully thrive, the mature size of the plant should fit in the space where it will be placed. If your heart is set on a particular plant, but space will not allow for mature growth, look for a compact or dwarf variety. An internet search should reveal numerous choices with width and height measurements. The mature size of a tree may interfere with overhead power lines or other trees, or the tree may eventually overextend its welcome by encroaching over a driveway or sidewalk. If a dwarf variety of your favorite does not exist, try a plant with a similar habit, physical characteristics, and growing requirements.

There is likely a plant for nearly every challenging spot in a landscape, and many can be the stars of the show in our yard. Using information on the plant tags and searching for additional information online can give us a good picture of what the plant needs to be successful. If we look beyond the beautiful pink bloom, or shiny variegated leaves on a plant, and learn a little more about its habit, we will be pleased with our new choice, and our plant will be happier!