



Photo by Paulette Eppler

Plants for Birds:

Colorado Spruce (Colorado Blue Spruce)

- **Scientific Name:** *Picea pungens*
- **Height:** up to 60 feet
- **Hardiness:** Zone 2
- **Wildlife Value:** Excellent shelter, nesting sites, and seeds for food

Colorado spruce is a beautiful native North American conifer known for its blue-green color and sharp pointed needle-like leaves. It is the state tree for Colorado and Utah and is known and beloved as a Christmas tree. As it grows large and takes on its infamous pyramidal shape, it makes a stately, strong presence in a garden.

While we enjoy evergreen trees for their beauty and color, birds seek them out as a critical part of their habitat. The dense foliage offers reliable protection from winter snowstorms, other harsh weather conditions, and aggressive predators. Birds love the thick stiff branches and prickly needles for concealing nests, providing safe roosting sites, and deterring predators. Spruce are a favorite nesting site for robins, magpies, several species of sparrow, and a variety of other birds. Many birds and small mammals also feed on the seeds found in the cones including grouse, finches, crossbills, siskins, juncos, nuthatches, chickadees, chipmunks and red squirrels.

Although it is not a native to Montana, Colorado spruce grows just across the border in Idaho and Wyoming. It is used throughout our state as a popular ornamental. It grows well in cultivation, is easy to transfer and establish, and thus is one of the best evergreens to use for creating shelterbelts and wildlife thickets or to just establish conifers in the garden.

Give Colorado spruce plenty of room when you plant it, taking into consideration the full-grown dimensions of 60 feet high and 20 feet wide. The color of the tree can vary from blue, blue-green, or green in color. It does best in full sun but will tolerate some shade and once established is very easy to maintain. Colorado spruce grows well in zones 2-7 and adapts to a wide range of soils from alkaline to clay. It's the most drought tolerant of the spruces but benefits when irrigated during dry periods. However, it will not grow in soggy wet areas. This evergreen is a slow grower but is very long-lived. Many cultivars are available including some dwarf forms for smaller yards.

Whether planting Colorado spruce as a privacy screen, windbreak or a colorful evergreen garden specimen, it's sure to provide many benefits to the birds visiting your yard.

