

THE STORY OF PLANTS: THE YEWE

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ONCE UPON A TIME in a dark valley in western Germany I walked with my friend Eckhard. It was a picturesque valley where you might find the remnants of Hansel and Gretel's bread crumb trail or toadstools. The waters of the Eifgen brook tumble and giggle through this valley on their way to the Rhine. At a curve in the brook stand two ancient European yews (*Taxus baccata*) said by locals to be the site of druidic worship. Eckhard and I thumbed our noses

at the time-worn warning which promised death for those who slept in the sinister shadows of a yew and napped on the roots of those 1,000 year old trees. We woke refreshed in a non-denominational awe.

The name *yew* comes to us from the Old High German *iwe*, a word closely related to the German word for *eternity*. In Germany it was associated with the Winter Solstice, a dark day but also the day the sun began its return. Its association with death and rebirth crosses many cultures from Ireland to Japan. Today we still find ancient yews in church yards and cemeteries. It is hard to ignore the deadly toxicity of all parts of the plant except the red "berry" or aril, when considering these beliefs. It is likewise hard to ignore the longevity of the European yew, up to 5,000 years, and its ability to regenerate.

In the garden, yews have been prized for their easy regeneration from dormant buds, a unique trait among needled-evergreens. This makes them perfect candidates for hedges and topiaries. At Levens Hall in Cumbria, England, the famous yew hedges and topiaries have been sheared yearly ever since their planting in 1692. Even today modernist garden designers like Piet Oudolf and Gilles Clément lend form to their free-flowing designs with the use of clipped yews.

Of the eight species of *Taxus* in the Northern Hemisphere—once considered to be subspecies of *T. baccata*—four species



Taxus cuspidata 'Nana Aurescens' (dwarf golden Japanese yew)

are native to North America. *T. floridana*, one of the rarest conifers, is limited to a 20 mile stretch of the Apalachicola River in northern Florida. Our native Pacific yew (*T. brevifolia*), rare in gardens, has a wide range from southern Alaska to central California. In the last century it had been briefly elevated from its "trash tree" status when the chemical paclitaxel found in the bark was discovered to be an effective treatment for certain cancers.

As a gardener I have retained some of my childhood fear of the dark. I find the patent-leather leaves of black mondo grass funereal and an allée of thundercloud plums oppressive. Yet a dark yew hedge I find exquisite. The most common yew for hedging, the Hicks yew (*T. x media* 'Hicksii') is actually an American interspecific hybrid between *T. baccata* and *T. cuspidata* (Japanese yew). All yews need not be sheared though. I grow the dwarf golden Japanese yew (*T. cuspidata* 'Nana Aurescens') for its small size and year-round cheery dandelion-yellow foliage in my mixed borders. The Dutch cultivar *T. baccata* 'Amersfoort' I keep in a pot at home has stumped most of my gardening friends, who guess it to be a podocarpus or a hebe.

It was a dark day as I wrote this, though the Winter Solstice was a month away. I remembered a fairy tale my German mother used to tell.

"Time goes faster as you get older."

I didn't believe her.

But now that I am older I realize fairy tales do come true, and I know the darkness of winter will move on as fast as our splendid summer did. 🌿

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