



Tie in loose conifer branches

Keep growth upright and neat

Tall, upright conifers such as Italian cypress and juniper 'Skyrocket' can sometimes become a bit lax around the edges, especially if they are growing in damp soil or have been battered by winds.

Sideshoots or larger branches can start to droop out at an angle rather than retaining the tight, upright form that they are known for.

Instead of pruning out the offending branch which could leave an unsightly

hole, pull it horizontal again by tying it into a sturdier neighbouring branch (make sure the branch has no serious damage first. If it is splintered and badly damaged, pruning might be better).

Tie string in a figure of eight around the lax branch and the larger branch on the inside of the tree. Gently pull the string tight so that the lax branch is pulled upright. Do this in two or three places if the branch is larger and needs plenty of support.

Sow first year flowering perennials

Germinate them in a heated propagator that blooms this year

Early sowings of hardy perennials can encourage the plants to flower in their first year. Try this technique with aquilegias, perennial foxgloves, delphiniums and leucanthemum for fast flowers, but you will need a heated propagator or somewhere else bright that stays at around 15C (60F).

They can be raised in the same way as bedding plants, but will germinate at slightly cooler temperatures. Make an early sowing in trays or pots in late January or February and place them in the heated propagator.



Tidy crab apples

Give them a light prune

Remove any rotten or mummified fruit from crab apple trees. Also look at the tree and see if it needs a prune. Simply remove any dead, diseased or damaged shoots, plus any that are crossing or rubbing. Any stems are growing in an awkward direction that spoil the shape of the tree can be removed too.

Crab apples form a naturally well-branched structure so heavy pruning may spoil the look of the tree so err on the side of caution.



Tools for the job

Geoff Hodge tests border spades for some quality, easy digging

BEST BORDER SPADE

Joseph Bentley Stainless Steel Border Spade £29.99

One of the lightest and among the longest (78cm/30¾in shaft) tested. It features a polished stainless steel head and ash shaft with Y-shaped 'D' grip. The digging blade measures 24x14.5cm (9½x5¾in) and has a 1.6cm (⅝in) deep tread, giving great protection to my feet.

Extremely easy and comfortable to use.

Supplier information: 01905 791984; www.josephbentley.org.uk



BEST FOR COMFORT

Gardena Terraline Small Spade £24.99

The longest, but heaviest spade on test, the shaft measuring 89cm (35in) long. It is ergonomically cranked for ease of use and features a non-slip, cold-insulating plastic sleeve. The 23.5x16cm (9¼x6¼in) blade is made from coated, hardened steel and has extra wide (4cm/1½in deep) plastic-coated treads for added comfort. The very wide 'D'-shaped handle means you can use both hands easily.

The built-in shock absorption system reduces any vibration and kick-back during digging. Supplier information: Husqvarna UK, 08448 444558; www.gardena.com/uk



BEST SOFT GRIP

Yeoman Stainless Steel Border Spade £24.99

This Yeoman spade has the same stainless steel blade as the Joseph Bentley version and a reasonably long (75cm/29½in) shaft, the upper section being made of ash. The ergonomically-designed plastic 'D' handle features a soft making it very comfortable to use even after long periods.

Supplier information: 01905 791984; www.yeomangarden.com



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