

Ask The Plant Groom™ by Dale Groom, The Plant Groom™

For: QA1050

Last summer I acquired a Japanese Black Pine. At least that is what the folks at a local retail nursery said it was. And I believe they really think so. I wanted one because in N. Y., a friend of mine had a grand one on his terrace, about 10 ft. tall, very dark black-green, and conical in shape. Japanese Black Pine in a recent column was described as a good pine for this area. I don't believe my pine is a Japanese Black and I can't find one at several nurseries I checked with. Please tell me where I can get one. I really want one for my balcony.

I also need to know how far back to trim a hanging basket of bougainvillea in my home. You wrote on bougainvillea not long ago but I don't remember that you mentioned pruning. - R. E.

I'm sorry to hear you are having such a difficult time in finding a tree that usually is easily located in garden centers all over Texas. A true Japanese Black Pine is *Pinus thunbergia* and is winter hardy to only a zone 6. They may reach 40-60 ft. tall and 20-30 ft. wide with age in your area and are considered a moderate to rapid grower. When young it's form is somewhat pyramidal but with age it becomes more oval and informal.

It is a very tough and durable pine that is adaptable to a wide range of soils and growing conditions as long as they drain well. When properly cared for this pine may grow 2-4 ft. per year and be dark green in color. If pushed too fast with (N) nitrogen fertilizers it may become open, loose branched and lose some of its attractive character. It requires full sun for best growth. Not enough light will cause it to grow poorly and develop a more open character.

A thought. Unless your friend lives in Suffolk County or other areas of N. Y. in zones 6 or 7, which are very limited in N. Y. he may not have actually had a Japanese Black pine but some other pine and there are many. There are many independent nurseries that do carry the true

Japanese Black pine in Texas. One way to tell for sure is to look for the plant's tag. It will have the genus and species I have given on it. You may shear these pines to help them remain more compact and full or direct their growth in specific forms. Perhaps this will help them to better fit your location and develop the character or form you desire.

I have been known to severely cut back some of my bougainvilleas. I don't think you would have any problems if you cut your basket back as far as you want to. I would cut back a minimum of 50% myself because they occupy a lot of room.

We recently moved to a wood frame house with hardly any landscaping. I want to make landscape beds around the house for both shrubs and flowers. I know that the grass must be removed and the soil "built up". We only have about two inches of slab height to the first siding board on the house. It's my understanding that there is a threat of termites and/or other "critters" invading if soil touches the wood. So, how can I build up the soil and keep it from touching our wood siding? - B.C.

Heavy clay soils need to be improved for most plants used in landscaping.

In your situation if you added materials to build up the soil in a bed above your slab level you may have some water seepage into your house. Termites would not be my concern.

Here is what I would most likely do. Instead of actually raising the improved soil mix above the foundation top it could be at the same level with proper drainage installed. The plants should grow well if the soil is improved correctly. In the area below where the shrubs are to be planted I would totally remove the soil 16" deep and wide. Where bedding plants are to be grown an area 12" deep and 16"+ wide for the length of the bed would be removed. These excavated areas should touch for better drainage. In the bottom of the shrub planting areas install a French drainage system to carry away any excess water in the bed. Next I would improve the soil with organic material. A 50%-50% mix by volume of native soil and organic material like brown Canadian peat moss, pine bark mulch and compost would then be blended to back fill the bed. This loose and well

draining mix would then be added to equal almost the height of your slab's height. It will settle some and this should make it just about where you want it.

All of my landscape beds are a minimum of 5' wide. This allows for adequate room for shrub growth, space for color and the ability to keep water off our home while watering.

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