

A Passion for Shrubs

by Eva Monheim

SHRUBS ARE THE EYE-CANDY OF OUR GARDENS—they sit below, at, and just above eye level as we walk through the landscape.

Plants Tailored to Fit

Shrubs exhibit many shapes and forms, purposely fitting into the natural environment like puzzle pieces. Rounded shrubs fit under contoured arching branches of ancient trees at the woodland's edge, and vase or fan-shaped shrubs fit neatly under the tallest of woodland trees while protecting perennials growing snugly beneath. Wide, sprawling shrubs shield the soil and other plants below while providing habitat for small creatures. The human scale of shrubs makes us aware that we are not just viewing the landscape, we are part of it. Our place in the landscape helps us to have a better relationship with the plants that we surround ourselves with while getting to learn their nuances.

Shrubs can be massed together as one species to form tightly clipped hedges or allowed to grow to their natural form with softened edges, creating blurred lines between the surrounding plant communities. Staggered plantings, with multiple species of shrubs, allows a varied visual that enhances dimension and form, especially during blooming periods, fruiting, and fall color.

In foundation plantings, shrubs can reduce heat loss from our homes by blocking cold winter winds. They also protect less frost hardy plants from winter desiccation and can provide seasonal interest when the bleak days of wintry weather have taken their toll. Late winter-blooming varieties nourish hungry pollinators after a long freeze and offer a foretaste of spring.

The possibilities are endless with the use of shrubs, and make no

mistake—they play critical roles when used to delineate a property line, hide a visual eyesore, or reduce the sound of a busy roadway. Their natural structure helps join the soaring tree canopy above with the underlayer of the forest floor or garden beds beneath. Shrubs are the connectors of the plant kingdom.

Utility and Benefits of Shrubs

Taller shrubs can act as small trees, while shorter shrubs take the position of a groundcover, protecting the soil from erosion and providing habitat for ground-nesting birds and beneficial insects. Animal enthusiasts don't need to be reminded that shrubs provide a major food source for mammals and birds, even the rare turkey and pheasant. Edible nut- and berry-producing shrubs allow for greater animal activity, including a highly enriched food source for us. Highbush blueberries (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), lowbush blueberries



Highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum* 'Jersey') has a fantastic fall color besides its yummy fruits earlier in the year.

(*Vaccinium angustifolium*) and black huckleberry (*Gaylussacia baccata*) offer edible opportunities, while creating a visual fiery display of fall foliage. The latter two plants are great used as a ground cover which fills in to provide an almost weedless landscape.

Edible fruits at children's height encourages education and sampling experiences for our future naturalists.



Lowbush blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*) forms a beautiful thick groundcover which will turn a red blaze in the fall.

Many lessons can be taught about food sources and self-reliance in a day when children are mainly disenfranchised from nature, often trapped indoors by their own devices.

Entire industries are created around shrubs because of the myriad products that come from their various plant parts. I like to encourage the entrepreneurial spirit by teaching which shrubs can be used for additional income. In the cut floral industry, large early spring-blooming branches like Japanese flowering quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa*) can be cut for the wholesale cut market for forcing to create showy arrangements that herald spring, while evergreen and broadleaf shrubs can be cut for their amazing and long-lasting foliage for floral designs.

Living in one of the nine major migratory flyways in the world along the East Coast, we can be amazed daily



Japanese flowering quince (*Chaenomeles speciosa*) can be cut while the buds show color but are still tight and can be forced indoors. Cut branches at the base of the shrub to encourage rejuvenating growth.



Bare branches of red-twigged dogwood (*Cornus sericea* 'Cardinal') provide structural elements in designs while also using their stems for garden crafts and accents like constructed waddles (woven fencing) and for basket making.



'Tiasquam' is one of the taller cultivars coming in around 9' and ripens early—it was originally discovered on Martha's Vineyard in Massachusetts.



Russian arborvitae (*Microbiota decussata*), foreground, is not only a great ground cover but a great green for cutting to use in arranging. It turns russet red in the cold but as soon as it warms up to room temperature it is bright green. Yellow-twigged dogwood (*Cornus sericea* 'Flaviramea') adds a golden color to the landscape.

by the diversity of bird species that pop in for early morning breakfast or a late afternoon snack as our feathered friends continue their journeys to winter habitats or spring mating



The earliest ripening of the winterberry holly is 'Red Sprite' and has one of the shortest statures of the cultivars—approximately 3'.

regions. Using five or six different winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*) cultivars in the garden can support as much as five months of avian activity for our viewing pleasure. Here are some cultivars to consider: the ever famous 'Winter Red', 'Winter Gold', 'Red Sprite', 'Tiasquam', and 'Maryland Beauty'—pollinated by 'Jim Dandy' and 'Early Male'. Each

has a different height, bloom time, and time of ripening. There are many other wonderful cultivars for creating a huge range of diversity for bird watching and color in the garden.

Native spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), found in our riparian corridors, burst buds early in the season with chartreuse blooms to herald the arrival of spring. Their spicy leaves are certainly not to go unnoticed when rubbed between the fingers yielding their amazing fragrance. And, when the leaves and twigs are steeped in hot water, they make a pleasant tea that works wonders for coughs and colds. Without this plant in our garden, the spicebush swallowtail butterfly would not be able to complete its life cycle.



Blooms of spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)



'Winter Red' is the best for long-lasting berries and is usually used in the cut flower market place. This holly is less susceptible to berry drop from ethylene gas during the ripening process and can hold onto its berries well into February. This photo was taken in September.



'Winter Red' in late December



'Winter Gold' provides a different pop of color during late fall and winter. It is a sport of 'Winter Red' and has similar berry-holding power.



Peeling bark of heptacodium (*Heptacodium miconioides*)



Heptacodium (*Heptadocium miconioides*) not only provides a wonderful winter visual of exfoliating peeling bark, but also provides a later summer fragrant bloom (above) followed by a rose-colored sepal display that lasts into September (below).

Designing Your Garden

I suggest making a small map of your property to show areas that are the most heavily used and focus your initial investments of plants in these areas. Also note views from the inside of your home looking outside. The windows that you gaze out more frequently will be primary areas for concentrating your new shrub installations. Winter and spring interest provides the greatest enjoyment when we have had a long gloomy winter.

Using tracing paper, you can overlay each season of plants over the next so that you know what will be blooming when. Having simple plans will help to commit to a good plant palette and design.

Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta') shows off its contorted stems in winter and its green twisted foliage in the summer. Plus, it has a wonderful display from its catkins as they elongate in the spring, dangling in the breeze to pollinate the female flowers that sit above the male catkins.

Summer interest can be stretched by using a plethora of repeat-blooming roses from David Austin, Anthony Tesselaar plants, Star Roses, Weeks Roses, and Van Belle roses. Their bloom enhances the garden's full range



Harry Lauder's walking stick (*Corylus avellana* 'Contorta') shows its green, twisted foliage in the summer and provides architectural interest against a winter snow.



Buying fothergilla (*Fothergilla gardenii*) in the spring allows you the seasonal visual that makes this plant so appealing. It also has a wonderful sweet fragrance.



Fall color can vary as in the above mapleleaf viburnum (*Viburnum acerifolium*) in red or in orange (below).

of color, shapes, and sizes—including ground covers—and many of them will bloom until frost. The new roses also have great disease resistance and are self-cleaning to reduce unsightly visuals.

Purchasing Your Plants

I suggest a fool-proof method of purchasing by buying your plants when they are in bloom, fruit, or fall color to make sure you are buying exactly what you want.

Because there is an endless array of native and non-native shrubs, I hope you keep an eye out for the ones that appeal to you and your garden setting. Multiple seasons of interest including special bark, bloom, fragrance, nuts, and berries will provide year-round interest. It will be up to you to make your favorite selections for your personal paradise to be filled with beauty and bounty.



Ed Note: All pictures provided by Eva Monheim, unless specified otherwise.

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If you miss a major season of interest for the plant that you want, visit garden centers in the fall too. You might want to pick another plant that may have good fall fruiting like beautyberry (*Callicarpa dichotoma*).



Fothergilla's fall color is amazing, but fothergilla is usually not available in nurseries in the fall. Try to plan ahead.