

Woody Perennials for the Herbaceous Perennial Border

A few years ago, I discovered that many flowering shrubs could be grown easily from liners or plugs just as easily as perennials are. Furthermore, many of the new woody plant introductions are initially only available as liners. Shrubs like *Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Coppertina' or *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Quickfire' won't be available as a larger shrub until next year, but can be gotten now as small plants. While most customers prefer their shrubs to be larger, some will take them younger (especially the new varieties) and usually realize a cost savings.

I don't want to focus on the newest woody plants for this article but rather on shrubs that can be grown in a mixed bed. Thus, most of these plants should be available at any good nursery. My first shrubs to discuss are the spireas. They tend to be overused by landscapers, but you can't deny that they're tough and, if given an annual pruning, can look pretty good. My favorite in the perennial border is *Spiraea x bumalda* 'Fire Light'. It is an improvement over 'Goldflame' in that it doesn't revert. Fire Light has orange spring growth and excellent red fall color. The summer foliage is gold and it blooms a deep pink in June. It ranges from two to three feet tall, depending on how you prune it, and it can be grown in sun or part shade.

Other June bloomers include the roses. There are many excellent shrub roses, but few can weave themselves in with herbaceous perennials as well as those that only reach 30 inches. *Rosa* 'Nearly Wild' is a floribunda highly hybridized for great pink color, disease resistance and repeat bloom. It should flush at least three times, the last bloom ending with the first hard freeze in October. The other two roses I use in perennial borders are *R. rugosa* hybrids from the Explorer series out of Ottawa: 'Charles Albanel' and 'Henry Hudson'. Both roses are small and don't stand well on their own in a rose bed. They are much better suited to the mixed border, even toward the front. Charles Albanel has fragrant mauve-red flowers, while Henry Hudson is pure white. Both are recurrent bloomers with red hips and yellow-orange fall color.

Two dark-leaved Weigelas, *W. florida* 'Midnight Wine' and 'Ruby Queen' have been introduced recently. Midnight Wine is the smaller of the two at 18-24 inches, with darker burgundy-purple leaves. Ruby Queen, however, still has a touch of green in its leaves, providing some contrast while still staying small. Of the two, I prefer Ruby Queen, because it is a better grower and still provides a strong accent. Both have pink flowers and bloom in early June. They are not the hardiest Weigelas. But if they are zapped by a hard winter, they do come back from the roots and will still bloom, albeit later in the summer.

I have become a big fan of the East Asian Lespedezas. Unlike our native Lespedezas, the East Asian ones want to be woody shrubs. But we live in Wisconsin and they tend to die back to the ground every year. Happily, they are late-summer bloomers and flower on new wood. *L. bicolor* 'Yakushima' is a very attractive and fine-textured lime-green mound at 12 to 18 inches until late summer, when it is covered with violet-purple flowers. It is perfect for the front of the border. *L. thunbergii* 'Gilbralter' is a larger Lespedeza growing up to three feet. It has a weeping habit and prefers to be staked or wedged in between sturdier plants. Gilbralter begins to bloom in August, with vivid pinkish-purple flowers on light green foliage.

Beautyberry or *Callicarpa* also blooms late in the summer, but the real show doesn't start until September, when it shows off its fruits. There are several available *Callicarpa* species and cultivars, some of which (*C. dichotoma* and *C. japonica*) are hardier. But all die back to the ground here in Wisconsin. They easily regenerate from the roots and bloom like fools on the new wood. However, it is important to select a cultivar that sets fruit early. A freeze can make the fruit appear unsightly. *C. dichotoma* 'Early Amethyst' is by far the

best for this area. It grows three to four feet and shines with bright purple berries in September. Put Early Amethyst in the back of the border where it can lie low, until it shines at the end of the season.

Alas, space doesn't allow me to go on forever. Honorable mentions go to *Diervilla lonicera* 'Copper' a selection of a Wisconsin native that will do well in dry shade (and under a walnut) and to the hardy St. John's Worts: *Hypericum kalmianum* and *H. frondosum*. Look for *H. kalmianum* 'Blue Satin' with bluer foliage and *H. frondosum* 'Sunburst' with extra large flowers.

All of these shrubs will come back from the roots if deer, rabbits or hard winters are an issue. I recommend that you try mixing some in with your iris, turtlehead and asters. These shrubs contribute unique color, flowers or texture to the herbaceous perennial border and will begin to blur your definition of "perennial."

—Bob Klebba

Bob Klebba owns and operates Morningwood Farm Nursery in Mount Horeb, Morningwood is open M-F 9:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., Sat 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Sun 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Contact Bob at www.morningwoodfarm.com, phone 608-798-1991.