

Accent Plantings to Enliven the Garden

By Susan Camp

A horizontal garden without a planting or structure to draw the eye upward is boring. One way to increase vertical appeal is to add a small tree or large shrub at the edge of the garden. A flowering tree or one that produces berries will provide a shady spot in which to sit and enjoy the flowers and watch the bees, butterflies, and birds.

Last year my husband and I removed a Juneberry (*Amelanchier arborea*) from our front garden. It had grown too large and eclipsed the sunnier half of the garden. Now we are looking for a replacement. I have included information on three small to medium-sized trees.

Selection of a tree or shrub that will fit the designated space in size, usefulness, and ease of care is paramount. A fast-growing tree that achieves a height of 40 feet at maturity can destroy paved walkways and change a sunny garden into a shady one. Trees and shrubs with sharp thorns can present a liability and should be kept away from paths and children's play areas. Messy fruits can stain walkways. Seed pods will sprout unwanted seedlings and develop into a nightmare of endless weeding and raking. Some exotic species can become invasive.

The environmental requirements of soil, light, water, and nearby structures must be considered. A tree will develop a broader crown if it is planted in an open area, away from buildings and other trees. A good resource is Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) publication 426-611 "Selecting Landscape Plants: Flowering Trees". The publication includes descriptions of several popular native and non-native small to medium-sized trees.

The native fringetree, also called old man's beard (*Chionanthus virginicus*), can grow to a height of 10-20 feet with a spread of 12 feet. It is slow-growing and shrub-like, but lower branches can be pruned to give it a tree shape. Its chief feature is the explosion of feathery, white blossoms in late spring. The female fringetree produces clusters of dark blue fruit, but it can be difficult to distinguish a female from a male tree. Fringetree takes full sun to part shade and will grow in most acidic soils. Insects and diseases rarely cause serious problems. VCE Publication 3010-1499 and Clemson University Extension Publication HGIC 1027 both provide useful information about this lovely tree.

Washington hawthorn (*Crataegus phaenopyrum*) grows to a height of about 25 feet with a 20 foot spread. It takes full sun to part shade and acid to alkaline soil. Hawthorns produce dainty, white flowers in May and June, following by tasty, red berries. Most hawthorns are covered with sharp thorns, although there are a few thornless varieties. Hawthorn is susceptible to cedar-hawthorn rust, fire blight, borers, and leaf-eating insects. Despite these issues, hawthorn remains a personal favorite of ours. VCE Publication 450-610 covers fire blight of ornamental trees.

Juneberry (*Amelanchier arborea*), also called downy serviceberry, is a slow-growing native tree. Masses of lacy, white flowers appear in spring, followed by edible, purple berries. Songbirds and hummingbirds love the tree, which offers a haven of small branches for safety. Juneberry requires full sun to part shade and acid, well-drained soil. Juneberry is susceptible to several insects, as well as bacterial and fungal infections. Our Juneberry survived a major ice storm and Hurricane Isabel and would still be in our garden, if it had not outgrown its space. If we decide to use a Juneberry again, we will be careful about placement and pruning. University of Florida Extension Publication #ENH232 provides helpful information on *Amelanchier*.

The list of potential ornamental trees for accent planting is long. A large shrub, particularly a native that will provide food and shelter for wildlife, is another possibility, and a subject for a future column.

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