

A Plan for All Seasons

Please excuse the pun, but we do need a plan if we want easy care and year around interest in our home landscapes. If you are diminishing the size of your grass area as a way to reduce the time and money spent on it, that plan should focus on small flowering shrubs as the plants that require the least care but offer the most interest.

Small flowering shrubs whether used as an island or on the borders of your property have flower and foliage diversity in all seasons. Rhododendrons, especially the smaller species we call Azaleas dominate our spring gardens and by using evergreen cultivars that bloom early, mid-season, and late the color is extended. But the often neglected deciduous Azaleas are even lovelier.

In a landscape of high shade nothing is more elegant than these plants that show early buds on bare branches. A truly late bloomer is *R. arborescens*, Sweet Azalea, that surprises you with white or light pink blooms in late July. The leaves turn red before falling so it has color in fall. It is native from Pennsylvania to Alabama so will survive our hot summers especially if given shade. Another deciduous native is the Coast Azalea, *R. atlanticum* with leathery blue/green leaves and pink buds opening to fragrant white flowers.

These natives have been encouraged to intermarry and many of the hybrids have brilliant colors, not just peach and raspberry but yellow, gold and orange. Niche Gardens in Chapel Hill, N.C. grows quantities of natives, including Rhododendrons. They suggest light shade and morning sun for deciduous species that bloom from early spring until fall in a spectacular range of color. Many are tall but one, *R. atlanticum* 'Marydel' is only three to six feet. If you are shrinking your lawn area with an island or linking two stand-alone trees, you probably do not want to hide the front door. If you are on a busy road, conversely, you may wish a tallish mixed group of shrubs at the front of your lot to provide quiet and privacy.

One old favorite, the fragrant Mock Orange, *Philadelphus*, is welcome in late spring but its large ungainly presence is deservedly ignored the rest of the year. This pet has been glamorized: *P.* 'Snowbelle' is a double-bloomed darling reaching only four feet. If you wish to taper the boundaries of your property from tall shrubs or small trees, to a mid-size shrub border, ending in short plants linking the border to the lawn, look for dwarf cultivars of your favorites.

There is a golden leaved *Spirea*, 'Golden Elf' that grows only six to eight inches but spreads one and a half to two feet wide. It even tolerates full sun without its golden leaves toasting. Bright red fall color means you won't mind that the flowers are modest. Shrubs with stems that arch toward the lawn are effective as bridge plants between taller shrubs and your grass. There is a new *Lespedeza thunbergii* 'Pink Cascade', pink bush clover, that is only three to five feet tall and has pink pea-like blooms trimming the long weeping branches. I tried *L.t.*'Gibraltar', the purple bush clove, because they are

easy to grow, tough plants. In dry, miserable soil it died, expectedly. Only Juniper survives on that bank.

For a plant that blooms a month earlier than Forsythia, try winter Jasmine, *Jasminum nudiflorum*. Its yellow blooms burst along arching green stems and it stays three or four feet high unless you train it on a trellis or it stretches into a nearby Azalea. As familiar as it is easy to grow, *Hydrangea arborescens* 'Annabelle' has huge fat creamy globes all summer on a plant that spreads to five feet but is only three or four feet tall. It may be pruned lightly in late winter as it blooms on the current season's growth. I thought I had planted the native oakleaf Hydrangea, *H. 'Pee Wee'*, two to four feet: it is surely oak-leafed but six feet tall. Be sure to check the ultimate size!

CHIGGERS

We who live here know all about chiggers but a lot of what we know is wrong. Chiggers are the larval form of a specific family of mites, the Trombiculidae. Mites are arachnids, like spiders and scorpions and are related to ticks. It is only this larval stage that is interested in biting: adult chiggers are vegetarian. Too small to be seen with the naked eye, they do not burrow but when they bite they inject saliva that contains a digestive enzyme that dissolves the skin it touches, liquefying it for food, that the chigger is able to suck up. Ugh. The resulting red welt does itch like crazy but soap and water right away after being out where they lie in wait, i.e. weedy places, will get rid of them before they bite. Wash all your clothes as well! Once bitten, forget the nail polish. Any salve or ointment for bites will help, antihistamines etc.

Chiggers are affected by temperature, most active in the afternoon when the temperature is between 77 and 86. Below 60 they are inactive and 42 degrees will kill them. Mosquito repellents will repel them but need to be reapplied after a few hours. Powdered sulphur from the drug store keeps them off, if you can stand the smell.