



Years ago I taught a course on woody plants to a variety of audiences. One technique I drove into my students' heads (at least I hope I did!) was identifying and evaluating the Five Fs of a particular woody plant: foliage, fall color, flowers, fruit, and form, all of which are attractively offered by outstanding trees and shrubs. I also constantly reminded my students to be mindful of a sixth attribute: a plant's bark. Whether gray and ridged, brown and platy, or red and smooth, bark adds another dimension to a woody plant, and that cannot be said of annuals or perennials.

Although not often considered, bark quality can become the memorable, and impressive, icing on the cake. It is one of many reasons why you as a container gardener will now consider using trees and shrubs in containers . . . right?

A SELECTION OF TREES AND SHRUBS FOR CONTAINERS

- **Acer palmatum**—Of all the many maples, I think Japanese maples make the best container subjects. Quite a few of them grow slowly and can be kept even



smaller through judicious pruning. 'Sango-kaku' produces typical starry leaves, which turn a clear yellow in fall, but this one's claim to fame is its almost glowing red bark in winter. All of the cut-leaf forms (*A. palmatum* var. *dissectum* and many named cultivars) produce lacy foliage that ignites in fall; many of them grow into gently weeping, almost flowing mounds.

- **Ajania pacifica**—A close relative of *Chrysanthemum*, *Ajania* is prized far more for its dark green foliage with gray-felted edges and undersides than for its clusters of yellow-button flowers in late fall. It looks best when grown by itself in a pot, which allows the neat mound shape to develop unhindered. Cut back by half in spring to keep it tight, especially if you fertilize liberally.
- **Aloysia triphylla**—I grow lemon verbena primarily for its powerfully lemon-scented foliage, but its fine texture can make a nice

- ④ Vibrant red-stemmed dogwood (*Comus sanguinea* 'Midwinter Fire') is perfect for winter pots, even in colder climates.

contrast to coarser leaves. It may fall short in attributes when compared with many other woody plants, but you will not care when you intentionally rub the leaves or unintentionally brush it as you walk by. Try it as an open, informal topiary.

- **Anisodonteia xhypomadara**—If you want little hibiscus-like pink blooms on a fine-textured shrub for months, then this is your plant. Grow more than one so that you can get them on a staggered cycle of cutting back, which will keep the plants denser, and at least one should be in bloom at any given time while the others are setting buds. You can also let plants grow looser and more openly, which will let them mix more easily with other plants in a combination pot. It quickly and readily makes a very appealing topiary.
- **Citrus**—Everyone should be able to enjoy the delicious floral fragrance and satisfying plump fruit of citrus. Of course most selections grow rather large, and all of them must be protected in cold areas, but they are worth the effort. My

pick of the litter is *C. ichangensis*, a compact grower that periodically bears heavy crops of perfect, average-sized, bright yellow lemons at an early age on quite small plants. Keep it in one of your best pots.

- **Cornus**—Almost all of the colored-twig dogwoods grow large and must be mercilessly thinned out and cut back, but no other group of plants offers such dramatically colorful lines in winter. The smooth bark on selections of *C. alba*, *C. sanguinea*, and *C. stolonifera* offers warming shades of red, yellow, and orange to light up your winter garden, and some variegated selections bring color and medium texture to pots in summer.
- **Cuphea**—Two quite different species make equally valuable contributions to container gardening. *Cuphea hyssopifolia* (Hawaiian heather) produces very fine-textured, intricately branched mounds studded with starry little white or lavender flowers. *Cuphea ignea* (cigar flower) is much more open, with larger, widely spaced leaves and fewer but prominent tubular

red flowers that draw hummingbirds and butterflies.

- **Fuchsia**—Those of you who live in areas with mild winters and cooler summers can grow just about any of the hundreds of selections available, so by all means enjoy their candy colors and unique dancing-lady flower form on upright to gracefully cascading plants. A hot, humid summer almost guarantees their demise, except for the triphylla types, most famously represented by upright-growing ‘Gartenmeister Bonstedt’. Its dark red-toned foliage and elongated bright orange-red flowers almost make me forget about the other ones.
- **Hebe**—Many of these grow too large for most containers, but you can always tuck a few little-leafed hebes in with coarser-textured plants for a very pleasing contrast. I particularly like *H. xfranciscana* ‘Variegata’, with cheerful cream-edged leaves and occasional purple flowers.
- **Hydrangea macrophylla**—Yes, those big, zaftig shrubs that thrive by the coast grow quite well by



themselves in equally big containers. Give them plenty of water and fertilizer for the most abundant display of their magnificent globs of flowers against robust, coarse-textured foliage. Start with ‘Endless Summer’, a relatively new selection that is taking the gardening world by storm, and for good reason: once it starts blooming, at least a few ethereal blue flower heads will attract attention for the rest of the season.

- **Juniperus**—If you want to have some green (or blue-

gray or gold) in your cold-country container garden overwinter, try some selections of *J. chinensis* (Chinese juniper) in big pots. Most grow quite large but can be held back by pruning. The many selections of *J. horizontalis* (creeping juniper) provide green and blue-gray spreading and cascading linear interest, and *J. squamata* ‘Blue Star’ slowly makes bright blue-gray, irregular mounds. The latter two combine nicely with other hardy woody plants in the same large pot.

- **Lonicera nitida**—While the plain green boxleaf honeysuckle makes a dense, fine-textured evergreen hedge in the open garden, ‘Baggesen’s Gold’ commands attention in a pot with its long arching or cascading stems and yellow-gold foliage. Thin it out periodically to keep it in bounds, and try it in a fairly shady spot, where the foliage will glow a lively chartreuse.
- **Melianthus major**—Honeybush will captivate you with its blue-green, finely cut, complicated-looking large leaves on upright to sometimes floppy plants. Keep a small plant in a combination pot for its first year, but be prepared to isolate it in a large pot after that. It looks stunning with apricot, pink, or pale yellow, as well as with dark purple and even brown.
- **Phygelius**—When young and still

- 5 *Melianthus major*, the honeybush, cries out for use in containers, whether grown by itself or as a pale complement to vivid bloomers. Rangy older stems may need staking, but new shoots will soon emerge.
- 6 Many tubular-flowered triphylla-type fuchsias, like this *Fuchsia* ‘Gartenmeister Bonstedt’, tolerate heat far better than the more familiar-looking petticoatlike selections.

small, the colorful flowers, arching lines, spacious form, and rather fine texture of Cape fuchsias combine and contrast appealingly with

many plants. A more established pot of them can easily serve as a focal point. The large, elongated clusters of trumpetlike flowers

