

ARNOLDIA



A continuation of the
BULLETIN OF POPULAR INFORMATION
of the Arnold Arboretum, Harvard University

VOLUME 21

MAY 26, 1961

NUMBER 9

THE BEST ORNAMENTAL SPIREAS*

SPIREAS, as a group, are not a very important part of the garden picture. A few have been extremely popular, and at least one may have been overplanted in the past. Of the many species and varieties, 84 are growing in the Arnold Arboretum and only half that number are offered by American nurseries.

In the recommended list are only 28 species and varieties which I think are worthy of consideration for landscape planting, a too large number made necessary because there is a spread of nearly three months in the time of bloom. Also these recommended range in height from 1 to 12 feet, so that actually there are none too many for specific purposes.

There are several native to North America but these have not been selected as worthy landscape plants. *Spiraea latifolia* is the hardiest of all (Zone 2) and grows about four feet tall with white to pink flowers in pyramidal spikes, but it is only planted in the coldest regions (if at all) where other plants are not hardy.

Spiraea tomentosa, the native Hardhack Spirea of the eastern United States, is a weedy, three foot high shrub with poor foliage, possibly looking well in old cow pastures where it is native but suited for little else than in naturalistic plantings. It is listed by only a few United States nurseries.

The majority of those recommended are hardy in either Zone 4 or 5. Other than those already mentioned, it is highly probable that most spireas would suffer winter injury and hence require much renewal pruning if tried in colder areas, although there may be a few exceptions. For instance, F. L. Skinner of Dropmore, Manitoba, Canada, lists *Spiraea bumalda* 'Anthony Waterer,' *billiardi*, *media sericea*, *menziesi*, *pikoviersis*, *trichocarpa* and *trilobata*.

As a group they are valued chiefly for their flowers. None have ornamental

* Spirea is the correct spelling of the common name, but *Spiraea* is correct for the generic scientific name. This article is from a recent series by the author, appearing in the American Nurseryman.

fruits. Only a few like *S. prunifolia* and *thunbergii* may have autumn color worth mentioning.

Concerning the time of bloom, they are listed below in groups as they bloom in the vicinity of Boston, Mass.

Early May	June	Early to Mid-July
thunbergii	brachybotrys	albiflora
	decumbens	bumalda
Mid-May	margaritae	canescens
arguta	nipponica	japonica
multiflora	superba	
prunifolia	trichocarpa	July-August
	veitchii	bullata
Late May	wilsonii	
cantoniensis		
vanhouttei		

Most growers know that spireas can be divided into two groups for pruning purposes. Those that bloom on the previous year's growth (i e., the early flowering ones) should be pruned before they flower. In fact, if this is done in the very early spring this is one of the ways to increase the size of the flower clusters of such species as *bumalda*, *japonica* and *margaritae*. Other species blooming on the current year's growth are *albiflora*, *bullata* and *canescens*. (All the others in the recommended list bloom on the previous year's growth.)

As a group the spireas are thought of as having small, creamy white flowers in flat clusters or pyramidal spikes. Mention must be made of four species with pink flowers (*brachybotrys*, *bullata*, *margaritae* and *superba*) and two species with deep pink and almost red flowers—*bumalda* and *japonica*.

'Anthony Waterer' is perhaps the most popular of all low red flowered spireas, but *bumalda crispa* has flowers practically the same color and much better foliage. Both are about two feet tall, while the *japonica* varieties are about twice that height. These are undoubtedly mixed up or misnamed in the trade. The variety with the darkest red flowers of all the spireas is *S. japonica atrosanguinea*. The variety *ruberrima* has lighter colored flowers but they are still an excellent deep pink.

Finally, mention should be made of height and habit of these spireas. The lowest ones are *decumbens* and *bullata* which are 12 inches and 15 inches tall respectively—suitable only for planting in limited situations. *Spiraea albiflora* is only 18 inches high and the *bumalda* varieties about two feet. The tallest of the recommended spireas is *S. veitchii*—about 12 feet high. There must be a lot of planting room available to put in such a plant requiring an area of at least 225 square feet, where better shrubs like viburnums or rhododendrons would give much longer ornamental interest.



PLATE V
Spiraea veitchii, one of the tallest spireas.

It must be admitted that species like *S. arguta* and *vanhouttei* have a gracefully arching habit which is difficult to improve upon, especially when the branches are covered with flowers.

Spireas are easily propagated by cuttings, grow fast and so make saleable plants in a short time. They have no serious insect or disease pests, can be harshly pruned and recover quickly, and so have been used as cheap landscape "fillers" in many situations. As they mature they frequently require renewal pruning. The discerning plantsman will not grow many spireas, and the more valuable the garden space available, the fewer are the spireas that should be considered for it.

Recommended Spireas

albiflora 1½' Z 4 Japan Japanese White Spirea

This species is in many nurseries as *S. japonica alba* which is actually a synonym. It is a fine July-blooming, low, white spirea, which can be used to excellent advantage with the pink to red flowering *S. japonica* which is taller. It is also good to use in combination with *S. bumalda*.

×**arguta** 5-6' (*thunbergii* × *multiflora*) Garland Spirea

Originating before 1884, this is the most free flowering of the early spireas blooming in mid-May. The white flowers are borne in small umbels on arching branches, making it excellent for specimen planting.

compacta—The plant in the Arnold Arboretum is still pretty small but it looks as if it might have merit for ornamental planting.

×**brachybotrys** 8' Z 4 (*canescens* × *douglasii*)

One of the best of the taller summer blooming spireas with small, bright pink flowers in panicles 1½-3 inches long. Blooms in late June.

bullata 15'' Z 5 Japan

Flowers deep rosy pink, July and August—only valued as a dwarf shrub.

×**bumalda crispa** 2' Z 5 (*japonica* × *albiflora*)

Bright crimson flowers in flat clusters sometimes as much as 6 inches in diameter, the same color as those of 'Anthony Waterer.' This is of particular interest because of its leaves that are slightly twisted or crinkled, making it an excellent specimen for its foliage as well as its bright flowers.

×**bumalda froebelii** 3' Z 5 (*japonica* × *albiflora*) Froebel Spirea

With bright crimson flowers this is a popular plant among many U.S. nursery-men because the secondary growth is sufficiently tall and vigorous to cover the dead flower heads produced in early to mid-July.



PLATE VI
Spiraea bumalda crispa

×**bumalda** 'Anthony Waterer' 2' Z 5

A very low, crimson flowered spirea, popular since 1890 when it originated. The young foliage is tinged pink as it first appears in the early spring. The flowers first appear in late June.

×**bumalda** 'Norman' 10" tall, compact and very rare. The foliage is brown turning a raspberry purple in the fall and the flowers are rosy pink. *Note:* There are one or two other low 'mound like' spireas being offered in the trade, none of which I have yet seen but which may belong here. One is listed as *S. bumalda alpina* with pink flowers and another is listed as *S. digitata nana* with raspberry red flowers. The plant is reportedly only 4 inches tall and is supposed to come from Siberia.

canescens 6-10' Z 7 Himalayas Hoary Spirea

Blooming in July with clusters of white flowers 2 inches in diameter, borne on the upper side of gracefully arching branches.

cantoniensis 3' Z 6 China and Japan Reeve's Spirea

Sometimes incorrectly termed *S. reevesiana*, this is often considered even a better ornamental than the very popular *S. vanhouttei*, although the latter is more hardy. In parts of California it keeps its foliage a greater part of the year. The small, rounded white flower clusters are only 1-2" in diameter and appear in late May.

decumbens 1' Z 5 Southern Europe

Of special interest for rockeries, this low European, white flowering spirea is extremely difficult to find in American nurseries at present.

japonica 4½' Z 5 Japan Japanese Spirea

A handsome Japanese spirea but its height is sometimes against it, forcing people to use the lower *S. bumalda* varieties. However, the flowers are pale to deep pink, sometimes white, appearing in mid-June.

japonica atrosanguinea Mikado Spirea

This has the deepest red flowers of any spirea, the flat flower clusters often being 4-5" in diameter.

japonica ovalifolia—flowers white.

japonica ruberrima—flowers a deeper pink than those of the species.

×**margaritae** 4' Z 4 (*japonica* × *superba*) Margarita Spirea

With flat clusters of rosy pink flowers in late June. If the plant is thinned out

in the late winter and the few remaining shoots cut back to about one foot, it should be covered with blooms by late June, the blooms being from 3-6 inches in diameter. It may bloom a second or even a third time during the summer.

×**multiflora** 5' Z 4 (*crenata* × *hypericifolia*) Snow Garland Spirea

An excellent hybrid originating before 1884 with long slightly arched branches covered with small white flower clusters in May. This does very well indeed in the Dakotas, apparently better than in New England. Sometimes incorrectly listed as *S. multiflora arguta*.

nipponica rotundifolia 7' Z 4 Japan Big Nippon Spirea

With bluish green foliage, this shrub is rather stiff and not as graceful as others. The small clusters of white flowers are numerous, appearing in late May. It has larger leaves and flowers than the species, hence is recommended.

prunifolia 9' Z 4 Japan and China Bridalwreath

The small double white, button sized flowers in mid-May are this plant's popular feature. However, it is one of the very few spireas which has red to orange autumn color in the fall. The single flowered variety, *simplicissiflora*, does not make nearly as good an ornamental. There is no such variety as *plena* or *flore-plena*. This double flowered plant was the first to be found by botanists in the Orient (1843) and was given the specific name *prunifolia*. When the single flowered form was found later, it was given the varietal name. Usually the sequence is just reversed.

×**superba** 3' Z 4 (*albiflora* × *corymbosa*) Striped Spirea

Only valued because of its late June flowers (light rose) and its low height.

thunbergii 5' Z 4 Japan and China Thunberg Spirea

Single white flowers in early May, this is usually the first of the spireas to bloom. The leaves are small and pointed, the plant is graceful and finely branched and the foliage may turn orange in the fall under some conditions. However, it does better in the Middle Atlantic States and the South than in New England where it tends to be killed back somewhat by winter cold or where late spring frosts injure the early blossoms.

thunbergii compacta—I have not seen this plant but if correctly named it should have merit.

trichocarpa 6' Z 5 Korea Korean Spirea

Somewhat similar to *S. nipponica* and its varieties but it has larger flower clusters than *S. vanhouttei* and blooms shortly afterwards.

trichocarpa erecta—according to F. L. Skinner this is more compact, more dwarf than the species; flowers and flowering habit are similar.

×**vanhouttei** 6' Z 4 (*cantoniensis* × *trilobata*) Vanhoutte Spirea

Originating before 1868, this has become the most popular of all the spireas. It blooms in late May. Its arching habit is one of its best assets.

veitchii 12' Z 5 Central and West China Veitch Spirea

The tallest of the spireas with flat white flower clusters about 2 inches in diameter during mid-June.

wilsonii 7' Z 5 Central and Western China Wilson Spirea

In general this looks like *S. vanhouttei* but blooms slightly later—in early June.

Dropmore Hybrids needing more trial

The following three hybrids have originated at the Dropmore Nurseries of F. L. Skinner, Dropmore, Manitoba, Canada. Presumably they are hardy there in extremely low winter temperatures.

'Rosabella' (*S. betulifolia* hybrid) 12–15' tall with flat panicles of pink flowers throughout the summer, 2½' tall; flower clusters terminal and 6" in diameter. They are a washed pink, not a good color.

'Snow White' (*S. trichocarpa* × *trilobata*) The foliage is larger and a paler green and the individual flowers are slightly larger than those of *S. vanhouttei* which it closely resembles. However, 'Snow White' is quite hardy at Dropmore and *S. vanhouttei* is not.

'Summer Snow' (*S. betulifolia* × *media*) 2' tall, with flat panicles of white flowers starting the end of June and blooming until the end of August.

Other spireas needing further study are listed in the trade as:

bumalda alpina—"low cushion type with pink flowers."

digitata nana—"with raspberry red flowers, the plant being only 4 inches tall and from Siberia."

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