

Small Shrubs with Noteworthy Winter Bark

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The homeowner with a large expanse of land has the opportunity to experiment somewhat and develop separate areas devoted to specific genera of perennials, showy shrubs and the like. In a small garden, because of its limited size, all things must be rolled into one. If done well, with forethought and careful planning, it can have nearly as much variety as its larger counterpart without sacrificing style or aesthetics.

Since numbers of plants must of necessity be restricted, it is important to select those that can fulfill multiple purposes. Shrubs planted solely for their flowers, fruits or form are too limiting for the small garden. Every attempt should be made to seek out materials that have a combination of attributes — good form plus fragrant flowers, attractive fruits as well as eye-catching blossoms, low maintenance with fruit tempting to birds, etc.

Toward that end, this article proposes to present shrubs that, in addition to other primary attributes, have the secondary characteristic of interesting bark to recommend them. Since bark, for the most part, is not readily discernible until the leaves have fallen off in the autumn, these plants are especially valuable in the winter landscape. Inexperienced gardeners, if they think of the winter garden at all, think of it as the dull period that follows autumn's foliage extravaganza and precedes spring's bulb display. Adding a few shrubs such as these to the garden could make it an object of year-round interest rather than "just another garden."

Shrubs With Red Winter Color

A number of shrubs exhibiting a characteristic red winter bark are suitable for planting in the small garden. Space dictates that we limit these to only a few, and the ones selected



Cornus sericea. Photo: P. Chvany.

are some of the best. The selection includes both upright shrubs and groundcovers, evergreens and deciduous specimens, plants with prominent floral displays, and those with inconspicuous flowers. Certainly there should be something for everyone.

Dogwood. As a group, shrubby dogwoods afford some of winter's most attractive colors. There are at least ten species that could be used, but, undoubtedly, the most spectacular of the group is *Cornus alba* 'Sibirica', the Siberian Dogwood. With a maximum height of 9 feet, it can be used as either a prominent specimen shrub in a moist area or as a backdrop for lower growing dwarf conifers. Its twigs reach maximum coloration in winter when they become a lovely coral-red.

Faster growing than the Siberian Dogwood but equally at home in moist locations is *Cornus sericea*, commonly known as Red Osier Dogwood. The winter twigs of the species are a brilliant red and when seen "en masse" they almost appear as a sheet of flame. Two varieties exhibiting differing twig colors are also available. *Cornus sericea* 'Flaviramea' colors yellow and *C. sericea* 'Nitida' is green. Because they spread rapidly by underground stolons, this species and its varieties are especially suited to bank plantings where they succeed in checking erosion.

Rose. Among red-twigged shrubs, some of the roses present themselves as possibilities. Many have a dull or dark red bark that is perfectly satisfactory in the winter landscape. There are several, however, whose coloring is a more glossy red, and one of these is *Rosa virginiana*, the Virginia Rose. Indeed, as an all-round rose in general, this is certainly one of the best. Flowers appear in late spring, followed by good summer foliage, blazing autumn color and fruits, and brilliant red twigs in the fall. It attains a height of approximately 6 feet and is most effectively used as an informal barrier hedge. A vigorous growth habit requires that this shrub be kept under restraint in the small garden, but if cut to the ground every few years or so it grows back into a handsome specimen in no time at all.

Willow. Once seen, it is difficult to forget the graceful weeping willow with its long, slender yellow branches gently raking the ground in the breeze. One of the most handsome willows by far is *Salix alba* 'Chermesina', the Redstem Willow. If left to mature into a tree this will reach a height of 75 feet, but if cut back frequently and regularly it can be maintained as a good-sized shrub with conspicuous, vibrant red-orange twigs. As a tree its color is considerably less pronounced. Like all willows it prefers moist soil, but beware of planting near septic lines or drainage pipes. A very invasive root system has the tendency to clog the pipes and cause problems.

Green-Twigged Shrubs

Broom. Two of the most attractive green-twigged shrubs belong to the same genus — *Cytisus*. Commonly called "brooms" because of the use to which they were put in centuries past, these relatives of the pea maintain a uniform green all winter, giving them an evergreen look. Add to this the fact that they are lovely in flower, have small, dainty leaves, and are virtually insect and pest free and it is understandable why so many people have developed an affection for these plants. They are not terribly fussy as to site requirements and actually prefer a poor, dry, sandy soil with good sun. Two of the very best are *Cytisus* × *praecox* and *Cytisus scoparius*.

The former, the Warminster Broom, is more reliably hardy in New England than the Scotch Broom (*C. scoparius*), although the latter has managed to naturalize itself on Cape Cod and Nantucket. Pale yellow flowers cover the 6-foot Warminster Broom in profusion each May, making this one of the first brooms to flower each spring.

Cytisus scoparius, up to 9 feet, is slightly taller and offers hybrids with great variation in flower color.

Shrubs With Exfoliating Bark

Plants with exfoliating bark are among the most eye-catching in the white world of winter. Whether the bark peels off in long, thin strips, as on the White Birch, or in small, irregular patches as it does on the *Stewartias*, the contrasts and color tones between the layers are unparalleled for visual interest.

Stewartia. Although most *Stewartias* fall into the tree category, the Showy *Stewartia* (*Stewartia ovata grandiflora*), at 15 feet, is worthy of inclusion in the small lot. In addition to tree bark, which on older trees flakes off in irregular patches exposing lighter colors beneath, there are the flowers and autumn color to consider. The large (4-inch diameter) white flowers are extremely showy with very attractive purple stamens, and the foliage colors up to a distinctive orange in fall. Devoid of leaves in the winter, the Showy *Stewartia* nonetheless remains prominent in the landscape because of its very distinctive bark. An excellent small tree accent plant, it is not reliably hardy north of southern New England.

St.-John's-Wort. *Hypericum prolificum* (Shrubby St.-John's-Wort) is one of the taller of these woody shrubs at 3-4 feet. It is a vigorous grower and forms a rounded mound covered with yellow flowers and glossy green leaves. Like the brooms, most *Hypericums* will do well in a dry, sandy soil with plenty of sun. The bark is a cinnamon-like red-brown that separates readily into masses of thin scales.

Curious Barks

Euonymus. The Winged *Euonymus* (*Euonymus alatus*) is one of the hardiest of all *Euonymus* species. It reaches a maximum of 9 feet and has ornamental value for several reasons. Its autumn color is a vivid scarlet, suggesting its other common name — Burningbush. It is often noticeable in the autumn in highway plantings along major roadsides.

The twigs are covered all over with a corky growth that lends this shrub an aura of the exotic. Although not as visible from the distance as the shrubs with colored twigs, Winged *Euonymus* still merits planting if only because it is somewhat unusual. It makes an excellent hedge as well as a specimen shrub. Be forewarned, however, that all *Euonymus* are susceptible to se-

rious infestations of scale. The vine types are attacked more frequently, but all species should be carefully watched for signs of the pest.

A few notes on cultural practices necessary for the maintenance of optimum color are in order here. As many of these shrubs mature and grow older, the glossy, vibrant twig coloration displayed in their youth tends to grow dull and almost disappear. Heavy pruning annually in the early spring generally results in the vigorous production of new young shoots that will color up nicely by winter. Oftentimes it is entirely in order to cut a rank, overgrown shrub right down to the ground in order to stimulate new shoot growth. In most of the above-mentioned shrubs, resurging growth develops quickly and in the *Rosa virginiana*, for example, it will have achieved a lovely form only two years after being cut down.

As is the case with autumn foliage coloration, twig coloration is dependent upon sunlight and reasonably good soil. The addition of a nitrogenous fertilizer to the soil is an additional factor often spelling the difference between adequate and superlative coloration.

The list of plants with interesting bark is a fascinating one and could go on almost endlessly. For the person with a small property and the desire to cultivate a winter garden, the above suggestions are listed as mere starting points. The scope and aesthetics of plants with winter appeal are limitless and certainly worth pursuing.