

Bushes and shrubs rank high as important design elements.

Here's how to use them to your home's advantage.

WHEN *bush*



Lilac



Rhododendron

COMES TO *shrub*

BY RICHARD RIX

Bushes and shrubs rank so high among the major horticultural features of the garden that they are rightly regarded as important design elements. Fortunately, we are blessed with a wide variety of them, and here are some suggestions as to those that work well in the Toronto-area garden with minimal care and fuss.

Bush and shrub are synonymous terms – it's just that a bush tends to be bigger. Thus, all bushes are shrubs but not vice-versa. For the purists, we'll use the term shrub here,

though we'll deal mainly with bushes.

A very easy and rewarding shrub is jet-bead (*Rhodotypos tetrapetala*), which sustains interest from mid-spring to late fall. It rarely grows higher than 1.5 metres and has pretty white flowers in spring, followed by hard black berries. Its leaf growth is graceful, and in a sheltered spot it will carry its leaves, gradually turning yellow, right through the first light frosts when most other plants succumb.

A complementary shrub to jetbead is

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Black Jetbead

flowering almond (*Prunus triloba*). It flowers much earlier in springtime and is content to let jetbead steal its glory soon after. Both do well in the shade of a tree like a maple or a pine, as long as they get a few hours of direct sunlight a day, however oblique. Both too are drought-tolerant and do well as foundation plants. The only proviso is that the almond tends to grow faster than jetbead, so it needs more vigorous pruning. Oh, and yes: the flowering almond is utterly nutless.

Diablo (*Physocarpus opulifolius*) deserves a spot in all sizeable yards, for it will grow to 2 metres tall in a favourable spot and spread even farther than that. It prefers full sun and moist conditions, and will reward you with purplish leaves and hydrangea-like blooms in summertime, not to mention a peeling bark that many people find attractive. It is seen to advantage in mass plantings as a hedge alongside open fencing, such as in gardens



Redbark Dogwood

that adjoin parkland.

If you have a spare sunny spot, then do try Potentilla. It will provide an abundance of flowers, usually yellow, from early summer well into fall. Potentilla is easy to transplant, never grows big enough to be problematic, and thrives in almost any soil. In early spring, just cut about one-third of its old stems down to the ground.

Though its name suggests otherwise, smoke bush (*Cotinus coggryria*) is actually a small tree that makes a welcome addition to a sunny location in the urban landscape. Fuzzy, pinkish, billowy hairs hang from its spent flower clusters throughout summer and give

the impression of smokiness, making this a useful accent plant. In fall its vivid green or blue-green leaves undergo a remarkable transformation through reds and yellows and copper. Even when bare, its showy trunk retains interest.

Burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*) gets



Hybrid Holly, Blue Holly

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its name from the way its leaves turn a brilliant scarlet in fall, though don't confuse it with kochia, which has the appearance of an evergreen shrub but is in fact an annual often sold under the burning bush name. During summer, 'real' burning bush is useful for its compact leaves and dense growth. In a favourable spot, its orange berries will provide a splash of colour all through the wickedest winter. Dwarf versions, such as Rudy Haag, are well suited to the smaller garden, and all they really ask is good drainage and a sunny spot.

Other shrubs worthy of a place in gardens large and small include the viburnums, dogwoods and mock oranges. Some mock oranges are fragrant even when not in bloom, while Korean spice viburnum (*V. carlesii*) has a spring fragrance that ranks among the best, providing it is planted in full sun and enjoys a moist, acidified soil. If it's spring fragrance you seek, lilacs will oblige of course, though they can grow as tall as trees and offer little after flowering.

When you say hibiscus, many people think in terms of a tropical plant that succours hummingbirds year-round and is unsuited to our climate. Wrong! There are many named horticultural varieties that will work in the Toronto garden, one of the best being rose of Sharon (*H. syriacus*), also known as Althea. Rose of Sharon does extremely well with a western exposure and can be allowed to grow rampant, when it can reach 5 metres tall or more, or kept tightly pruned to less than half that



Rose of Sharon



Richard Rix

height. Either way, it will bear colourful, mallow-like flowers in late summer and fall – just don't over-feed or over-water it.

All the shrubs mentioned so far are deciduous, yet most gardens also benefit from the occasional evergreen variety for the sake of year-round interest and texture. Given its slow rate of growth, the yew (*Taxus*) can squeeze in here as a shrub, though some specimens are actually trees, and hardy ones at that, such as the huge verdant example seen in the grounds of St. Joseph's Oratory in Montreal.

Yew grows well in shade but even better with some sun. Be careful about planting it under deciduous trees, however, since the dramatic change from a shady summer to full winter sun can desiccate it. Holly (*Ilex*) is also worth trying though not reliably hardy, at least until well established.

Evergreen euonymus has been a popular choice to keep fences and bare ground covered all the year round. Now, however, all versions appear susceptible to the kind of blight that recently ravaged mature variegated specimens. 🌿

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