Pacific Connections in Your Garden!

15 Plants from the Arboretum’s Iconic Display That Will Invigorate Your Backyard

By Janine Anderson

What is it about the Arboretum’s Pacific Connections Garden that makes my heart race? It can’t be the altitude, as it’s barely above sea level, so it must be the exquisite array of flora represented in the collection.

The plants derive from five seemingly disparate regions, including our own (Cascadia, represented by the Siskiyou Mountains of coastal Oregon) and selected areas of China, Chile, Australia and New Zealand. These regions all border the Pacific Ocean and are part of the Pacific Rim of Fire. Although three of them are in the Southern Hemisphere, all the regions are latitudinally and climatically compatible with Cascadia and can invigorate the plant palette of area gardeners.

So far, just two of the five forests planned for Pacific Connections (New Zealand and Cascadia) have been completed. However, the five preview gardens installed around the central meadow demonstrate how plant species and varieties from each region can be combined in an attractive manner that one can mimic in a residential landscape. Following are profiles of three plants from each of the five regions that will inspire you to globetrot in your own backyard.

CHILE

I was dumbstruck when I first laid eyes on the fiery-red tubular flowers of *Embothrium coccineum* (Chilean fire bush). A hummingbird’s idea of heaven, the small, semi-deciduous tree offers three-season interest on a narrow, rangy...
scaffold. Fast growing to 20 feet tall, it blooms in late spring and continues bearing flowers into early summer and sometimes later. In the autumn months—all the way into December—you are treated to fall foliage in tones of purple and orange. The tree can be a bit tricky to establish. It does best in full sun to light shade and well-drained, acidic soil. Give it some protection from freezing winter winds and light watering during the dry summer months. You’ll find it for sale at a number of specialty growers, such as the marvelous Far Reaches Farm (farreachesfarm.com) near Port Townsend.

The hardy fuchsia, *Fuchsia magellanica var. gracilis ‘Aurea’*, can test one’s patience. Throughout winter, the arching, bare stems seem hopelessly unpromising. Despite being painstakingly slow to leaf out and flower, however, it is worth the wait because this diminutive fuchsia’s crimson and purple flowers and chartreuse foliage persist from spring, well into the fall season. The shrub grows up to three feet high by three feet wide and is a Great Plant Picks selection for our region (see greatplantpicks.org). Tuck it into a semi-shady corner and enjoy watching hummingbirds gather nectar from its irresistible blooms.

*Azara microphylla* (boxleaf azara) is a narrow, small tree with a graceful, layered habit. Its draping branches are covered with tiny evergreen leaves reminiscent of those of boxwood, hence the common name. In winter, the plant’s almost microscopic yellow flowers emit a heavenly scent of vanilla. (Not surprisingly, the Arboretum’s Witt Winter Garden also showcases this tree.) It grows up to 25 feet tall and 12 feet wide. A somewhat smaller, variegated form, *Azara microphylla ‘Variegata’*, is particularly effective in brightening up areas of low light. Boxleaf azara makes an interesting specimen tree. Because of the dense foliage, it can also be strategically placed to screen unwanted views. Indeed, planted in a row, the tree can make an effective privacy hedge. It does best in light shade and well-drained soil. Give it protection from winter winds and occasional water during hot dry spells.

**AUSTRALIA**

Royal grevillea would be an apt common name for the majestic *Grevillea victoriae*, even if its species epithet didn’t honor a British queen! Although especially floriferous in spring and summer, the evergreen shrub bears tubular reddish-orange flowers all year. Another hummingbird magnet—despite being from southeast Australia, where there are no native hummingbirds—it is also enjoyed by bees and butterflies and is usually resistant to predation by deer. Royal grevillea grows up to 10 feet tall by 10 feet wide but can be kept denser and more compact with careful
pruning. Its greenish-gray foliage is attractive year-round, and the plant is effective as a single specimen or planted as a screen. Although you can’t kill royal grevillea with benign neglect, you might be able to kill it with fertilizer (especially ones containing phosphorus), too much water, and too little sun. In other words, plant it in a sunny site with lean, well-drained soil.

*Podocarpus lawrencei* ‘Blue Gem’ could compete for the title of most useful garden plant. Not only is this gorgeous blue-needled conifer lovely planted en masse, it also combines well with other shrubs and grasses, and is even effective as a groundcover around trees. A spreading Tasmanian selection of the mountain plum-pine, ‘Blue Gem’ grows up to four feet tall by eight feet wide or more, but it can be sheared or snipped back to pretty much any size you need it to be. Drought-tolerant once established and adaptable to most growing conditions, it doesn’t perform well in deep shade. If there were ever a plant one could install and then forget about, this podocarp might just be it.

What a sweet, evergreen subshrub is *Prostanthera cuneata*, the alpine bush mint! Maxing out at about two feet tall with a spread of five feet, it is effective in a drift or as a bridge between taller plants. Its tiny, glossy, aromatic foliage repels pests, and it bears dainty, pale-violet, orchid-like flowers in late spring and early summer. A true member of the mint family, Lamiaceae, it is native to high-elevation shrublands of New South Wales and Victoria. It performs best in full sun to light shade, with average, well-drained soil. Avoid excessive watering!

**CHINA**

Scheffleras are more than just tropical plants that we can only grow indoors here! Some species, such *Schefflera delavayi*, have proved reliably hardy in our region. Native to mountain forests in Southwest China and Vietnam, this evergreen shrub is prized mostly for its large, exotic, compound foliage that can span up to three feet wide. However, the airy sprays of tiny white
flowers that bloom in fall are also intriguing. Ciscoe Morris has written that hardy scheffleras need extremely well-drained soil. I would caution that they are not completely drought tolerant either (especially when grown in sunnier spots) and so are not suitable for a xeriscape garden. Owing to space constraints, *Schefflera delavayi* is relegated to a patio container in my garden. Although it looks rather bedraggled at winter’s end, it regains its composure by early summer. In the Arboretum, you’ll find several nice specimens growing along the Loop Trail in the future China Forest section of Pacific Connections. A lovely specimen can also be seen in a border planting at Bloedel Reserve on Bainbridge Island on the northeast corner of the Bloedels’ former residence.

If royal grevillea is the queen of grevilleas, then *Hydrangea aspera* may well be the queen of hydrangeas. Native to Southern China, India and Nepal, this deciduous midsummer-flowering beauty produces large, bold, lance-shaped leaves—up to 10 inches long—with a felt-like, almost sandpapery texture. The large, delicate, lace-cap blooms consist of tiny, purple fertile flowers surrounded by white to pink, sterile florets. The shrub’s open habit showcases the flowers and the exfoliating bark on the trunk and branches. *Hydrangea aspera* grows up to 12 feet high and wide but can be made narrower by pruning out arching side branches and shorter by cutting branches back to new buds. Like most hydrangeas, it prefers light shade and consistently moist soil.

Buttercup winter hazel, *Corylopsis pauciflora*, provides a welcome sight in late winter, just when it’s needed. Three-inch-long racemes of butty yellow flowers cover its bare branches for about a month. Subtly corrugated, bright-green leaves emerge as the flowers fade. Later in the season, the yellow fall foliage glistens in the low autumn light. A dense, multi-stemmed deciduous shrub native to Taiwan and Japan, buttercup winter hazel grows up to five feet tall and eight feet wide. For best appearance and performance, plant it in a sheltered location with light-to-dappled shade and rich, well-drained soil. Like many of the plants profiled here, this is another Great Plant Picks selection for the Pacific Northwest.
CASCADIA

*Berberis nervosa*, Cascade mahonia, is a lovely native groundcover, especially for a shady or semi-shady location. It is particularly striking when massed beneath trees and shrubs. Growing up to two feet wide and four feet high, it produces long, wonderfully architectural evergreen leaves, each consisting of 9 to 19 glossy, bristle-toothed leaflets. Small, bright-yellow flowers are held in erect clusters above the foliage in April/May. By late summer, these develop into handsome, waxy blue berries. Cascade mahonia does best in moist, well-drained soil. It can handle full sun, where the foliage turns a plum color, but I prefer the rich-green foliage color of the shade-grown plant. Formerly known as *Mahonia nervosa*, it colonizes slowly via underground runners.

A stately, deciduous tree with deep-dark-green foliage and gray, fissured bark, *Quercus garryana* (Garry oak) should be grown in every garden that has the space to showcase it. In cultivation, trees can reach up to 75 feet high and wide! The maritime habitat of this native tree has been drastically reduced since 1839, the year botanist David Douglas named it (in honor of Nicholas Garry, an officer of the Hudson’s Bay Company). A great shade tree, Garry oak should be sited in a sunny location. Don’t have room for a large tree? The specimens of Garry oak in the Cascadia Forest at Pacific Connections are actually a shrubby variety native to the Siskiyous named *Quercus garryanna* var. *breweri*. Commonly called Brewer’s oak, it reaches up to 15 feet high with a spreading habit.

Among the most graceful of small trees, *Tsuga mertensiana* (mountain hemlock) is a knockout in any landscape. With fine-textured foliage and nicely layered branching, the slender conifer grows slowly to 35 feet tall in cultivation. (In the wild, it can reach up to 200 feet.) Plant it in lean, well-drained soil in full sun to light shade.

NEW ZEALAND

Most of the Southern Hemisphere’s 90 or so species of hebe (now all lumped into the genus *Veronica*) are from New Zealand, and many varieties are available in area nurseries. Among the most attractive and reliable of these is the subshrub *Veronica topiaria*. With its dense, rounded form and attractive glaucous foliage, it combines perfectly with other plants, providing contrast in scale, form, color and texture. After...
10 years, it will reach about four feet tall and five feet wide. At this point, you can lightly shear it to keep it more compact.

Ornamental grasses are among the most evocative of plants, and *Carex testacea* is among the most evocative of ornamental grasses. Evocative of what? The image that comes to my mind is of wading barefoot through a bed of seagrass. It has a mounding, arching form with finely textured foliage. The common name is orange sedge, and it's easy to see why: The leaves have highlights of golden brown, copper and olive green. Growing up to two feet tall, it works well edging a walkway or massed under trees and shrubs, provided the planting site is not too shady.

Truth be told, I've never met a variety of *Pittosporum tenuifolium* (kohuhu) that I haven't been nuts about—and the New Zealand Entry Garden has lots of these black-stemmed beauties. I love the small, semi-gloss evergreen foliage, which looks good year-round. Also, these shrubs take shearing, so if crowding becomes an issue, give them a buzz cut. Varieties I grow include ‘Tasman Ruffles’, ‘Marjorie Channon’, ‘Golfball’ and the diminutive ‘Tom Thumb’, which has shiny, purple-black foliage. Although somewhat more tender than other varieties, in its six years in my garden ‘Tom Thumb’ might be the easiest-care plant I have grown. I just added ‘Wrinkled Blue’ and am hopeful it will prove to be as well behaved as its cousins. Kohuhu performs best in full sun to light shade with moist, well-drained soils.