My early adventures in gardening were all about flowers. Inspired by Margery Fish’s “A Flower for Every Day,” I filled my city lot with perennials, from the earliest hellebores to billowing fall asters. This passionate pursuit of perennials led a friend to dub me “The Perennial Queen.”

However, visiting mature gardens in the Northwest awakened me to the need for a bigger picture. In my second garden of nearly an acre, I began to plant layers of beauty, through canopy, understory and ground cover. Of these three layers, the understory of shrubs has proven to be the most important. Shrubs provide privacy, flowers, foliage, berries, nectar and bird habitat. Best of all, I don’t have to bend all the way to the ground to deadhead their flowers or climb up anything hazardous to prune their branches!

SCREENING FOR PRIVACY

Shrubs answered the most urgent question in my second garden: How would I screen my kitchen and dining room from the view of the road? Soon after moving in, I realized that my street was the fast track to a school, library and post office. Cars speed along as if on a freeway, and bright-yellow buses roar back and forth twice daily.

Early efforts to screen with Michaelmas daisies (Aster) were pitiful, leaving the winter and spring landscape barren. I researched the best shrubs for wet Pacific Northwest winters and learned that deciduous shrub dogwoods would be right at home. I chose *Cornus alba* ‘Gouchaultii’, a cultivar of the Tartarian dogwood with red twigs in winter and multicolored gold, green and cream leaves that light up with red tints in fall. I also added two selections of our native red-osier dogwood: *Cornus sericea* ‘Hedgerows Gold’, with bright, golden-yellow, variegated foliage and red twigs; and ‘Silver and Gold’, with variegated foliage and yellow winter stems.

In just a few years, these three varieties formed the backbone of a screening border. Winter color from their branches and twigs, the green and variegated foliage in spring and summer, and the fall color from ‘Hedgerows Gold’...
gave plenty of interest. I planted tough flowering perennials on either side of these shrubs—yellow Jerusalem sage (*Phlomis russeliana*); red, yellow and burgundy day lilies (*Hemerocallis*); and fall-flowering sedums (*Sedum spectabile*)—and then filled in the shady areas with masses of hellebores, epimediums and ferns.

Shrub dogwoods grow vigorously (to around six feet tall and wide, in the case of these cultivars) and benefit from pruning out at least one-third of the canes in late winter. I trim back overlong branches in early summer to temper spring’s vigorous growth.

**SCREENING TO KEEP OUT THUGS**

With neighboring properties chockful of ivy, fireweed, docks, thistle and morning glory, I had to protect my perimeters. Fences would have been ideal but were too costly, so once again I turned to shrubs. In a nearby estate garden, I’d noticed a six-foot-tall hedge of false spiraea (*Sorbaria sorbifolia*) planted in full shade to screen a compost bin. The compound, lacy foliage of this deciduous Central Asian species resembles that of mountain ash (*Sorbus*), from which the scientific name is derived—though the suckering habit of the plant makes it look more like a drift of tall, upright ferns. At first, I planted some to screen my shady eastern perimeter. When a new neighbor moved in and removed many trees, my *Sorbaria* grew even better in sun! Plumes of white flowers bloom in early summer, adding some color to the green foliage. False spiraea grows quickly, colonizes, and is easy to divide, so I transplant divisions of it wherever I need emergency screening.

Because it spreads rapidly, this is not a shrub for a small garden. On a large property, it can be a real workhorse and help keep aggressive weeds at bay. If your space is limited and you’d still like to try the plant, seek out the cultivar *Sorbaria sorbifolia* ‘Sem’. Though it only grows to about four feet tall (and so has limited screening ability), it spreads less readily than the straight species and also offers coppery-pink new leaves.
Many cultivars of tall viburnums have proved to be excellent screens and weed barriers for me, too, especially *Viburnum sargentii* ‘Onondaga’ (Sargent viburnum), with burgundy new growth and white lace-cap flowers, and *V. lantana* ‘Mohican’ (wayfaring tree), with dark-green textured leaves and dense white flowers. Both are deciduous, upright shrubs that grow to about eight feet tall. Cutleaf black elder (*Sambucus nigra* f. *laciniata*)—with green, fern-like leaves and white flowers resembling those of Queen Anne’s lace—is delicate in appearance but extremely tough. Recommended for our region by Great Plants Picks (greatplantpicks.org), this deciduous shrub grows up to 15 feet tall in an elegant, vase-shaped form.

**SEASONAL FLOWERS**

Like the sound of a trumpet, the opening buds of *Mahonia × media* ‘Charity’ (syn. *Berberis × hortensis* ‘Charity’) announce the arrival of the winter garden’s unexpected beauty. Multiple stems of yellow flowers, each group like a bouquet, arise from the tops of evergreen foliage, bringing cheer and nectar. Excited hummingbirds line up on my nearby arbor, taking turns to dive into the blooms. Although the dark-green leaves of *Mahonia* are prickly, its stately presence and winter flowers, followed by long clusters of blue berries, make it a must in my garden. Over the years I’ve planted many varieties, including the Asian hybrid ‘Charity’ (a Great Plant Picks shrub that grows up to 10 feet tall and five feet wide), *Mahonia eurybracteata* ‘Cistus Silver’ (a platinum-leafed cultivar of a Chinese species that grows to five feet tall), and *Mahonia japonica*, which grows to seven feet and has surprisingly fragrant flowers.

Spring ushers in two white-flowering shrubs that light up a mixed border. *Pieris japonica* ‘Cavatine’—smothered with white, lily-of-the-valley flowers for a good month—is a dwarf form of the Japanese andromeda. In bud, it’s beautiful to behold, building anticipation with the tracery of pendant flowers to come. All andromedas are evergreen, and they’re available in a range of heights, with pink or white flowers. Several have variegated foliage. Growing about two feet tall and four feet wide at maturity, ‘Cavatine’ is another Great Plant Picks shrub.

Bigger and more dramatic, the doublefile viburnum *Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum* ‘Summer Snowflake’ should really be named ‘Spring Snowflake’: Though sporadic blooming can occur on the plant through summer, and even later, the main show is in May, when pure-white, lacecap flowers open above the wide-spreading branches in graceful layers. In fall, the flowers give way to tiny, red, egg-shaped berries, while the leaves turn bronze-red. ‘Summer Snowflake’ grows up to eight feet high and 10 feet wide and, like most of the shrubs profiled here, adapts to varying light and soil conditions. With age, the shrub colonizes, making it easy to remove and transplant divisions to new beds.

It wouldn’t be summer without hydrangeas, and of all the many varieties, I most adore the cultivars of the panicled hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata*) from East Asia. ‘Limelight’, with
white flowers that turn chartreuse, ‘Phantom’, with jumbo, upright white panicles, ‘Great Star’, with truly star-shaped white flowers, and ‘Pinky Winky’, with a two-toned display of white and then pink flowers, bloom together against a fence from midsummer through fall. Morning sun with afternoon shade is ideal, and regular summer watering (although not nearly as much as the mophead and lacecap hydrangeas demand) will keep them happy. Since they bloom on new wood, it’s best to prune them back by at least a third in early spring. Like the straight species, the cultivars are very winter hardy; however, they are more compact, growing between six and eight feet tall and wide.

Just when summer is past its peak, with daylilies only a memory, and roses beginning to wane, rose-of-Sharon (Hibiscus syriacus) comes to the rescue. With pink, burgundy, blue–violet and white flowers adorning these robust shrubs, the burst of color is a welcome delight. The blossoms also attract butterflies and hummingbirds. I’m partial to ‘Sugar Tip’ for its white rim edging the green leaves and double, pink flowers. It’s a star of my pink, white and green border, accompanied by pink varieties of Camellia and Phlox paniculata, and white varieties of Pieris, Hydrangea paniculata and Astrantia major. ‘Sugar Tip’ grows to about six feet tall and four feet wide.

IRRESISTIBLE FOLIAGE
Two dominant foliage colors—gold and wine—dance through my garden at intervals, unifying the array of island beds and borders. In addition to the golden-variegated shrub dogwoods mentioned earlier, golden varieties of glossy abelia (Abelia × grandiflora) and Spiraea are the glitter, while burgundy forms of ninebark (Physocarpus) and smoke bush (Cotinus) are the velvet.

Evergreen Abelia × grandiflora ‘Kaleidoscope’ blends small, glossy, gold–and–green leaves with brilliant–red stems to sparkling effect. A compact shrub, it grows up to two–and–a–half feet tall and three feet wide. The deciduous Spiraea japonica ‘Walbuma’ MAGIC CARPET® comes in even smaller, at about two feet high and wide. I love its red new leaves, which mature to bright gold and then turn russet red in fall. However, when the pink flowers come along in spring, I give this shrub a haircut, as I’m not fond of the pink and gold color combination.

For burgundy foliage, common ninebark (Physocarpus opulifolius), from Eastern North America, is a gardener’s dream—coming in dwarf, medium and tall varieties with reliably dark leaves and white flowers that turn to dark–red seed clusters. Physocarpus opulifolius ‘Center Glow’, SUMMER WINE® (‘Seward’) and COPPERTINA® (‘Mindia’) are favorite cultivars. Tall and wide-spread (COPPERTINA is the tallest, reaching to 10 feet) with arching branches, they are best pruned in late winter and trimmed in summer to reduce their enthusiastic growth. I’ve planted mine at spacious intervals, as each is a dominant focal point.

Purple smoke bush (Cotinus ‘Grace’), a hybrid of American smoke tree (Cotinus obovatus) and a purple–leafed variety of the European smoke tree (Cotinus coggygria), is even more dramatic, with glorious, dark foliage that commands attention. In summer, the oval, burgundy leaves are topped with clouds of puffy–pinkish “smoke”—large panicles of frothy flowers—until the wind blows them away like tumbleweed. In fall, the deciduous leaves turn luminous orange before dropping. To keep ‘Grace’ a shrub rather than a tree, pollard the plant in spring. I’ve actually let mine grow into a tree and trained the lavender–flowering Clematis ‘Betty Corning’ into its strong branches.

I have barely begun to sing the praises of shrubs, but for now I hope these will inspire you to try a few reliable ones in your garden.

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