

## BRING BACK THE SHRUB

In *The Garden* August 2009 (Viewpoint, pp552–553), Dan Pearson urged gardeners and designers to rekindle their interest in shrubs. Readers were asked which shrubs they would not be without.

In addition to the replies printed in the October issue (p647), here are some more responses:

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- How refreshing to read Dan Pearson's article on shrubs. As welcome additions to our gardens and essentials to wildlife in general, they have been ignored for far too long.

I spend a great deal of the spring and summer months away at major flower shows. As a consequence my garden comes into the 'slash and burn' category. I am especially fond of a group of *Philadelphus*, *Buddleja*, *Weigela* and *Deutzia* that were planted in entirely the wrong situation more than 20 years ago. Every summer they cascade through the hollies in front of them, towering far above their supposed height. Had I planted them with that intention, I'm sure it would not have worked – I cannot bring myself to prune them back as all the 'experts' suggest.

*Yvonne Milton, Suffolk*

- We love our garden, and have quite a lot of shrubs. The ones I wouldn't be without are: *Choisya ternata* SUNDANCE ('Lich'), for its continuous bright colour; *Pieris* 'Forest Flame' always looks healthy; *Acer* for constant beauty; *Phormium* for structural elegance.

*Mae Lock, Kent*

- As one of the nation's thousands of flower arrangers I feel I must draw your attention to our gardens, which are filled to the gunwales with shrubs of every shape, type colour and size... We look for unusual fasciation and variegation, but always have a backbone of good-cutting shrubs such as *Viburnum tinus*, bay, *choisya*, *sarcococca*, *ruscus*, and many others including those used by municipal planters. We also have shrubby perennials, such as *Hosta*, *Fatsia*, ivy, x *Fatshedera*, *Phormium tenax*, etc.

The flower arrangers' mantra is: we can always buy flowers but we need to grow our own foliage – so look in any flower arrangers' garden and you will find shrubs of many kinds.

*Judith Sandercock, Hereford*

- In my garden most of the colour (both winter and summer) is produced by shrubs. I bought my house from new seven years ago, so was able to plant it from the beginning. After choosing some trees to provide privacy, my main interest was in purchasing shrubs as the main content of all of my borders.

I have a red, yellow and green colour scheme and have planted a selection of evergreen hebes, bright-yellow spirea, *Photinia* 'Red Robin', assorted pieris, green, yellow and red acers, spotted laurel and variegated euonymus plus several potentilla alongside dwarf rhododendrons.

Shrubs form the main part of my front and back garden and just to ring the seasonal changes I hide quite large pots of spring bulbs during March to May among them, then in summer I remove these pots and replace them with pots of crocosmia, coleus, delphiniums and fuchsias.

My borders always look full of colour and life and people constantly stop as they walk or drive by and compliment me on my garden – my gardening skills are basic – I garden by instinct but because of the wonderful job done by these assorted shrubs they make gardening a joy. How anyone could think of laying out a garden without including shrubs, to me, is unthinkable, they are truly the backbone of any border or flowerbed.

One shrub I would not be without is *Choisya ternata* SUNDANCE ('Lich') – I really miss the sun during our long winters but just one look at this beautiful sunny yellow shrub truly lightens my mood, whatever the weather.

*Linda Dawson*

- I am a relatively novice and young gardener. I like to use shrubs as they provide bulk, background and good evergreen colour even in the depths of winter. I remember reading or hearing that around 1/3rd of your garden should be evergreen, and I have kept that in mind whenever selecting plants. Having done a quick head count on the back of Dan's article, I would actually estimate that 2/3rds of my garden plants are evergreen, or provide year-round interest (stems, winter flowers) and this includes grasses and perennials.

As to which shrubs I would be without? It seems a little mean to only do a top five, but if it is to be high-fidelity style gardening then in order:

- 1 *Viburnum tinus* (don't make me pick a cultivar)
- 2 *Cotinus coggygria*
- 3 *Viburnum x bodnantense* 'Dawn'
- 4 *Callicarpa bodinieri* var. *giraldii* 'Profusion'
- 5 *Skimmia japonica*

There are obviously all the do-ers that I haven't included, such as *Euonymus*, box and *Phormium*, lavender, *Choisya*, and colourful *Nandina domestica*.

In fact, I disagree that shrubs are in decline. If one was to use B&Q as a gardening reference point then the majority of plants on sale there (after bedding) are shrubs. Perhaps among the gardening elite the trend is for perennial and grasses, and I have a lot of those too, but for your average, low-maintenance gardener, the benefits of shrubs are very clear.

*Michelle Hiscutt, Northamptonshire.*

- Well done Dan Pearson, for highlighting the real need for shrubs, on behalf of all insects who depend on them. Our gardens would be all the poorer for not accommodating at least three or four shrubs. I have a great many in my garden, as well as 100 roses, which I suppose are also shrubs.

I wouldn't be without *Cotinus coggygia*, and also enjoy *Photinia*. I disagree with Dan on his 'no pruning' ethos, as how else would I get daylight into my borders?

*Margaret Warren, Hertfordshire*

- I am delighted to hear that shrubs are coming back into fashion; they are hard to beat for year-round interest and colour. Pruning is essential to prevent those tiny plants becoming untamed giants. In my previous garden I had room for them to grow to glory. At centre stage was *Cercidiphyllum*, which was like a living bonfire in autumn – it started to glow orange at the base, then burning scarlet, and smelt like caramel.

In my downsized garden I chose *Cornus*, *Calycanthus* and scented *Daphne* as some favourites to grow. *Rosa glauca* was also on the list for its foliage and hips and *Ribes speciosum* is prickly but gorgeous on the fence.

*Frances Denby, Shropshire*

- I read with great interest the article by Dan Pearson on shrubs. Shrubs have been in my garden since I bought the house in 1966 and I keep adding to them. They bring me great joy, producing flowers, fragrance, berries and colour. Lots of people say I have plenty of interest in my garden all year round, and I think the shrubs make it.

I have intermingled my shrubs with spring- and summer-flowering bulbs, roses and a few bedding plants and flowering perennials to give some extra colour in summer. I have only a narrow garden with two long borders down either side, and an area of shrubbery at the bottom where we also grow raspberries.

My favourites are: *Daphne bholua*; *Viburnum*; *Ceanothus* 'Concha'; *Euphorbia characias* SILVER SWAN ('Wilcott'); *Pyracantha coccinea* 'Red Column'; *Coprosma* 'Evening Glow'; *Choisya*; *Salix*; and *Mahonia*.

I think my real favourite out of all these is *Daphne bholua* 'Peter Smithers' which flowers profusely from late summer through winter. I have to pass it to get to my shed and the perfume is just wonderful. This shrub is not cheap, but it is worth its weight in gold.

I think the reason why shrubs have gone from a lot of gardens is that many people have got rid of their borders and lawns and have put slabs down and grow plants mostly in pots. This sort of garden does not lend itself to growing large shrubs. In our garden we have plenty of wildlife; the birds like the shrubs (a safe place to fly to from the feeders when maybe the sparrowhawk arrives) and of course insects and berries to eat. The blackbirds and starlings love *Mahonia* berries, and butterflies are also attracted to the shrubs.

RHS Garden Wisley is a great place to visit to see the shrubs all the year round, inspiration to write down a few names and visit the plant centre.

*Annette Streetley, Surrey*

- I must point out that shrubs have never been in decline in southwest England, or indeed in the west of Scotland. Anyone acquainted with gardens, large or small, in Cornwall and Devon in particular, will know that nearly all of these gardens are predominantly shrub gardens, planted with *Camellia*, *Rhododendron*, *Magnolia* and *Hydrangea*. Hardly surprising, given the mild, damp climate and acid soil in the West Country – so please let us hear no more about shrubs being out of fashion.

Incidentally my list of shrubs I would not be without, even in my very small garden, extends to far more than five, so I will not bother you with it...

*Mrs I Biggs, Cornwall*

- I have *Viburnum plicatum* f. *tomentosum* 'Mariesii', *Rhododendron*, *Camellia*, *Ceanothus*, several *Hydrangea* including *H. macrophylla* 'Mariesii Perfecta', *Cornus chinensis*, *Buddleja davidii* 'Peace', *Philadelphus* 'Virginal' and many more. I agree with Dan Pearson that we need more shrubs in gardens. I planted these 15 years ago and unfortunately I am selling the house and garden – I will miss them.

*Marina Blank, Shropshire*

- Dan Pearson on disappearing shrubs was so right. Surely they make the very backbone of a garden. It would be unthinkable to be without them. Fashion can be suspect and has a lot to answer for – creating trends for one set of things at the expense of often better ones. Look at the widespread excessive bedding-out that the Victorians displayed with a limited palette of plants. We were then perilously close to losing many treasures, but garden writers of the time alerted us to the dangers. It pays to be suspicious – fashion has nothing to do with essential excellence.

Shrubs have so much to contribute, for as well as providing structure and colour, in leaf as well as in flower, they help to create atmosphere, whether that be drama, peace and tranquillity or even mystery – the scope is endless.

I cherish two magnolias, *Magnolia wilsonii* and *M. x soulangeana* 'Lennei', and a shrub that I especially welcome for its glorious late-season lacecap flowers is *Hydrangea aspera* Villosa Group. *Eucryphia x nymansensis* 'Nymansay' is enjoyed in August, and *Sambucus nigra* f. *porphyrophylla* 'Eva' is now my favourite elder. There is too much shade in my garden for many roses, but the old one *R.* 'Perle d'Or' has remained happy for many years. The dark, glittering leaves of *Azara microphylla* have made a good background plant, the pattern of the branches a decoration in themselves, but visitors are mystified when the tiny hidden flowers in February waft their scent around the garden. Innumerable shrubs seem to provide some of our best

scents – I have long appreciated that from *Daphne bholua* 'Jacqueline Postill' and *Hamamelis x intermedia* 'Pallida'.

I could not bear to be without *Carpenteria californica*, with its beautiful white flowers and the same goes for the larger *Abutilon vitifolium* – in detail and in mass they are superlative. It is tempting to list others but I suppose I ought to call a halt, except for just one – in flower as I write (late July) – *Buddleja* 'Lochinch', with greyish leaves and full of butterflies.

*Irene Feesey, Essex*