

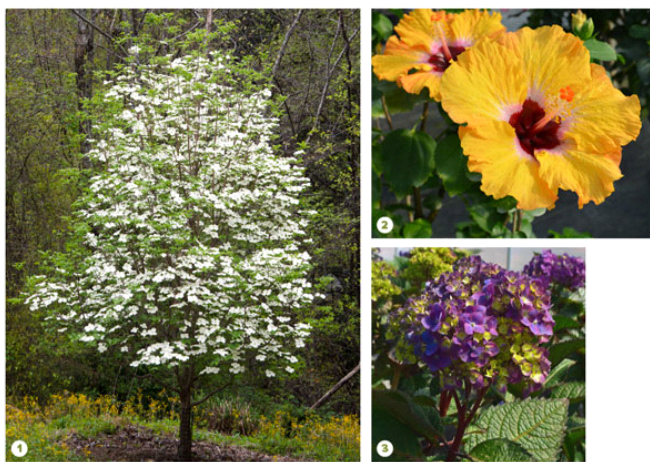
GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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Walkin' in a Woody Wonderland

Dr. Jeb Fields



The best part of running a trial garden is we get to grow so many varieties. When we get full, we just replant with something new ... or at least that's what we're supposed to do. In reality, we just keep expanding, which will probably get the best of me at some point. Either way, my guess is that I'm not the only one who feels like a kid on Christmas morning every year when all the new varieties arrive. That's why I was so excited when I was asked to write this feature. For years, I read Matt Chappell's August *GrowerTalks* article on new shrubs hitting the market—when I was asked to take this torch it was a no brainer.

I made a call for new varieties and was showered with more than I could possibly include. From the looks of it, 2025 will be another amazing year for new plant material and a tough year on my wallet, but that's what makes this fun. Choosing which would make the list was tough. That being said, I'm lucky enough to have a platform where I can continue to share more of what's new. Make sure to keep an eye on my *Nursery & Landscape Insider* newsletter, as I plan to continue sharing cultivars that weren't covered here over the coming weeks.

For the last few years, we've seen a trend of smaller and more compact plants. After all, yards are getting smaller around the country and customers want to put as much in as possible. Plus, small often means low maintenance—or at least that's the reigning thought. Much to my delight, that didn't seem to be the case for this upcoming year. With many large specimen plants releasing in 2025, it looks like we may have hit the peak of the grow-it-smaller trend. Although, that could just be an anomaly or my bias leaning me to the bigger and less space-friendly plants.

Now all I need is to find a way to grow some of these northern varieties in Louisiana, or maybe I just need to travel more to visit them in the ground. (Yes, that's it.) Here are my picks for the exciting new woodies coming to the market next year that you absolutely need to have.

Cornus Cloudburst

Right out of the gate, we have a new dogwood coming from Dr. Tom Ranney's North Carolina State University breeding program. This is a complex, triploid hybrid between *Cornus florida* and *C. kousa*. I'll be honest, I had a very tough time picking out a photo to include along with this entry, as they were all so amazing and highlighted different aspects of the tree. I decided to go with the overall tree in its fall color because who doesn't want to get a little sense

of fall in this extreme summer heat?

Beyond the fall color, Cloudburst sports very large, glossy leaves and huge white bracts that resemble *C. florida*. This selection will be available from J. Frank Schmidt and select nurseries in North Carolina.

Hollywood Hibiscus Golden Globe

Nothing says summer like hibiscus. I'm heading to Hawaii in a month, so you might say I have tropicals on my mind. I'll have to be honest, yellow is my favorite hibiscus flower color. Maybe it's because they look so good poolside or perhaps it was the yellow-flowered hibiscus that I spent countless hours with during my Ph.D. program. Either way, this one gets my vote. A part of the Hollywood Hibiscus series from J. Berry Nursery, Golden Globe has huge flowers—some of the biggest in the series. These blooms are mostly yellow with a vibrant red eye in the center. Put one of these in a container on your deck or patio and you'll be in love all summer long.

Seaside Serenade Pebble Beach Hydrangea

The newest member of the Seaside Serenade Hydrangea collection, Pebble Beach was chosen for its unique flowers and blooming power. The large mophead blooms are dark purple with acidic soil conditions and a deep pine in alkaline soils. The purple blooms look an awful lot like our LSU tiger purple, so maybe I'm biased, but the color is outstanding. The bright green backing to the blooms gives a unique texture and interest from this Monrovia introduction.

Golden Child Eastern Arborvitae

Another entry from Monrovia's top Distinctive Selections for 2025 that caught my eye is Golden Child Eastern Arborvitae. I'm absolutely in love with golden-colored shrubs right now—as is the rest of the country based on their popularity and this one is right on the money. This is an easy-to-grow, compact, globe-shaped arborvitae that glows in the garden. The bright golden color handles summer sun in Zones 5 to 9 without issue and the foliage will take a bronze hue in winter. This shrub is sure to stand out in any landscape.



Magical Ruby Snow Hydrangea

Going by Ruby Snow in the trade, *Hydrangea paniculata* Bokorubs is a new introduction from Plants Nouveau hitting the market in 2025. Ruby Snow boasts bright white panicles throughout the summer; however, as fall approaches and nights cool, these cone-shaped panicles turn ruby-red from the base up. With the tips remaining white, you get the distinct feel of a summer snow cone (if you haven't noticed from my imagery by now, it's much too hot for my liking this summer).

Changing colors in the landscape like a true chameleon, Ruby Snow stays compact for a panicle hydrangea and fits well in smaller gardens—absolutely perfect for small spaces.

Paisley Pup Leucothoe

I've always loved the plant name doghobble. Just the idea of my pup getting tangled up in this sprawling native shrub as she runs after a ball or squirrel is so ... fitting. This new doghobble from Proven Winners goes by the name Paisley Pup and is a broadleaf, low-profile evergreen. A southeastern United States native plant, *Leucothoe fontanesiana* can be found in shady understories, making this a perfect fit for a native/showcase landscape—particularly if you have some shade. The fragrant white flowers are a hit as they dangle from arching stems. But the real excitement with this nativar is the foliage, which has unique variegation leading to splashes of pink, green, white

and yellow all mixed into a deer-resistant shrub.

KoolKat Katsuratree

Climbing back into the trees, we have a cold hardy selection of *Cercidiphyllum japonicum* KoolDak from Todd West's program at North Dakota State University. It has incredible seasonal color change from a bronzy spring emergence to bluish-green in the summer and finishing with yellow/apricot in fall. This selection has survived without damage at -37F, so it's definitely something that can handle the harsh northern winters. This specific selection is unique, as it has early fall dormancy unlike others of the species, which attributes to its exceptional winter hardiness. Liners are available from Mountain Shadow Nursery in Olympia, Washington, and nursery stock can be sourced from J. Frank Schmidt & Son Co. in Boring, Oregon.

Summer Flare Japanese Tree Lilac

Sticking with cold-hardy tree selections from Todd West's NDSU program, this *Syringa reticulata* SumDak is a tall, upright Japanese tree lilac, reaching up to 35 ft. and exhibiting non-typical form. This narrow-form lilac has branches that ascend above a substantial trunk unlike many other cultivars. In early summer, large creamy-white flower panicles emerge and put on a full spectacle by late June. Great foliage color and prominent bark lenticels add to its ornamental features. You can pick these up from Bailey in St. Paul, Minnesota.

First Editions Big Beauty Gardenia

Who doesn't love a gardenia? Such an elegant shrub that's reminiscent of a simpler time. The fragrance always takes me right back to my grandmother's porch. Big Beauty (or *Gardenia jasminoides* Baildenaione to the students of horticulture) stands out from the crowd with double blooms and double the fragrance, with a massive amount of pure white blooms covering the plant all summer long. No matter where you go, on the porch or deep into the garden, you won't be able to miss its amazing scent. The natural round habit eliminates the need for continuous pruning. This 6- to 7-ft. gardenia, introduced by Bailey Innovations, can take the heat. It grows best in full sun and is ideal for hedging or as a foundation plant. A low-maintenance, high-fragrance gardenia? Sign me up.

Brew-Tea-Ful Camellia

Recent years have highlighted a national push for edible landscaping, but we often don't talk about drinkable (or more accurately, brewable) landscaping. While there are likely plants growing in your landscape that can be brewed into a delicious beverage, none can be more iconic than tea. There's been a big push for ornamental tea bush production in the last decade and it's finally here. Believe it or not, tea comes from a camellia (*C.*

sinensis, to be specific) and now there's a well-trained tea plant that does great in the southern U.S. Rated for Zones 7 to 9, Brew-Tea-Ful leaves can be stewed to make a delicious tea or just simply admire the flowers. Whether as a centerpiece or as tea, it's meant to be grown densely hedged. We've evaluated these plants for years in at the Hammond Research Station.



Ilex Mini Touch

Not every new shrub release needs to be large. Developed by Plant Development Services Inc., this *Ilex crenata* selection is adorable. Growing just 2 ft. x 2 ft., Mini Touch is the perfect plant for year-round foliage in small spaces. The compact, mounding habit lends itself to so many options in the landscape, from low-profile hedges to border plantings. Even a great centerpiece for showy planters, this small-leaved evergreen can do it all. Sometimes, we get wrapped up in flashy colors and flowers, but there's just something delightful about low-maintenance, classic hollies.

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