GROWERTALKS

Features

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Woody Plants for Cut Flowers

Katie Elzer-Peters



The Economic Research Service arm of the USDA reports that in 2022, more than 31,000 acres of flowers were grown in the open, an increase of 33% from the 2017 census. And domestic cut flower sales increased $90 million from the 2017 census (not adjusting for inflation).

Left: The original Hydrangea Pinky Winky was the 2023 Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers Woody Cut Flower of the Year. This is the improved Pinky Winky Prime.

When I was the floral design teaching assistant at Purdue (oh, around 1999), roundy moundy, high-flower-count bouquets were the epitome of style. Every arrangement was a tight little ball. When I got married five years later, they were still trendy, but more “wild”-looking flowers were coming into fashion. I got married in my parents’ house, which seems fancy, but in reality involved my cousins standing in the kitchen and my college buddies in the dining room. I gasped when I saw that the mantel had sprouted a fairy-like forest. “How much did we spend on flowers?” my dad asked. By 2011, when Prince William and Kate Middleton got married in the much grander Westminster Abbey, full-scale trees were brought into the space for decoration.

In ’99, sticks were a novelty unless you were making a holiday arrangement. Today, they’re the norm. When you combine maximalism and biophilia, add shipping costs and import restrictions, you have fertile conditions for a woody plant cut flower boom.

Natalie Carmolli, public relations specialist for Spring Meadow Nursery, sees it happening.

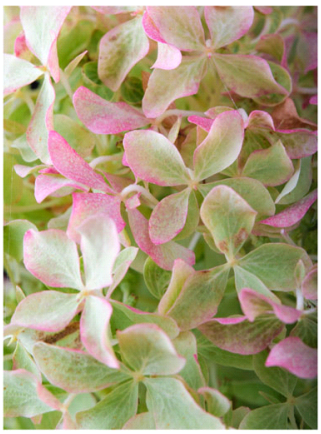
“We have more and more customers with cut flower farms growing shrubs as part of the mix,” she says. “Overall, they’re much less work than annual cut flower stock, and the initial investment pays off year after year. Many woody ornamentals also fulfill the much needed ‘filler’ category with colorful, interesting foliage that can be used all season. We like to say, ‘Cut all you want, they’ll grow right back.’”

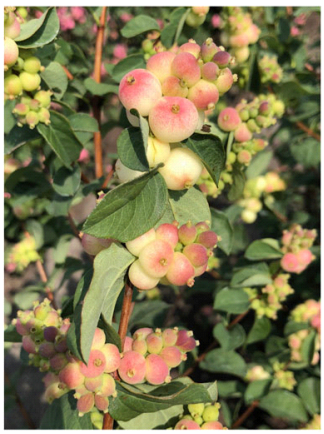
Rachel Siegfried, a U.K.-based florist, flower farmer and author of “The Cut Flower Sourcebook: Exceptional Perennials and Woody Plants for Cutting,” says, “Shrubs and perennials are, overall, a lot more profitable than other

cut flower choices. They just don't need the inputs of time, labor, water and compost that annual cut flowers require. They become more profitable over time if you're doing it as a business, too."

Another plus is that shrubs and perennials are much more resilient in the face of drastic weather changes and harsh weather conditions in comparison to annual cut flowers—and these weather events are only becoming more common.

What do you do with that information as a grower? Whether you sell to flower farmers, IGCs or box stores, there's an opportunity to lean into a plant's suitability for cutting as part of its marketing. An increasing number of consumers are making choices based on whether a plant works as a cut flower, which means you should, too. Here are some tips from the field.





Two-for-one plants

Angela Treadwell-Palmer, co-owner of Plants Nouveau, has been partnering with breeders in the Netherlands to bring to the U.S. new varieties with good genetics well-suited for growing as a cut.

Far left: *Hydrangea paniculata* Magical Lime Sparkle is a good medium-sized shrub with beautiful lacy flowers that change color throughout the season.

Symphoricarpos Magical Little Red Riding Hood.

Angela explains, "What makes a plant good for cutting isn't always what makes it great for the landscape. In addition to focusing on one use or another, breeders in the Netherlands are developing strong genetics that do both."

I've frequently had this conversation at conferences and trade shows: We don't need more new varieties for the sake of new varieties. We need new varieties that do something better.

And the breeders are working on it. Angela says, "For example, many new perennial varieties that are great for cutting also look good in a gallon pot, making them easier to sell." We love a good two-for-one plant.

Rachel does, too. "There's no reason not to plant trees and shrubs if you're growing cut flowers outdoors. I started planting them from the beginning as hedgerows to protect my flowers. I've had to learn how to manage the woody plants over time. It requires a different approach to manage for cutting rather than if they were just in your garden."

Home is where the heart(wood) is

Plants Nouveau works closely with Bailey Hale, founder of Farmer Bailey and Grow 'n' Sell, a business that brings young plants to specialty cut flower growers. "He knows what's trending and he brings it from overseas, acting as a broker for farmers that want 10 of this and 20 of that," Angela says.

She adds that many of Bailey's clients are hobby farmers, retired folks and those growing flowers at home as a second income or side hustle. "We've seen a lot of tree farmers putting in rows of woodies for cutting and selling during the holidays."

It makes sense to grow woodies "at home" (domestically) due to quarantine restrictions and freight costs. Imported plants have to quarantine, lengthening their time to market, and the cost of shipping larger stock makes it

inaccessible for buyers breaking into cut flower growing. So nurseries, make sure your local flower growers know you have stock suitable for their business needs!

Selecting for performance in the field and in the vase

Out of all of the trees, shrubs and perennials out there, how do you know what's hot and what's not? Rachel listed these as her top attributes for exceptional woody and/or perennial cut flowers:

- Plants with more than one stage of harvest. "They take up lots of space. You want to be able to get flowers, fruits, seedheads, and good summer or autumnal foliage."
- Interesting forms and branching structure. "When you buy imported flowers and foliage, the stems are all straight because they're easier to harvest, pack and ship. When I'm designing, I want something quirky, something interesting without too much coaxing."
- Fast growing. This is especially key with perennials. "You can go from seed to first harvest in one growing season with many perennials."
- Cut-and-come-again flowers. Re-blooming shrubs and perennials give a higher return for the space they occupy.
- Upward facing flowers, particularly in the case of perennials. "Hellebores are wonderful focal point flowers in the late winter and early spring. Look for types that look up."
- Anything that grows in shade, in addition to sharing the attributes from above. Symphoricarpos is a favorite of Rachel's because it will grow almost anywhere and has multiple seasons of interest.

Cultivation is key

Who's teaching cut flower growers how to be successful growing woody plants? That's where companies like Plants Nouveau come in.

"When we started the company, the U.S. market had really crashed because production had moved to Central and South America," says Angela. "With the decline in domestic cut flower production, knowledge was lost. Dutch growers are much more advanced. We're working with our breeder partners to bring that knowledge back to cut flower growers in the U.S."

A huge database update is on the way for Plants Nouveau, with cultivation sheets and cultivation information being added to every plant's page. There's a responsibility not only to grow and sell the plants, but to also make sure that the end consumers, especially flower farmers, are successful in keeping them alive and productive.

"You have to know when to harvest and use these plants," Rachel says. "Eucalyptus needs a full year to be hard enough to harvest. Many woodies for cutting are better harvested in autumn. In the summer their tips are too soft and [they] wilt."

You can see that in action with the trendy magnolia leaf products grown and designed by Erin Weston at her farm in North Carolina. She offers a select few specialty wreaths in the summer, but magnolia foliage needs to harden off before it's suitable for longer-lasting uses. Eighty-five percent of her business happens between October and December.

Vines and climbers are the next frontier when it comes to woodies and perennials for cuts. Rachel says she's experimenting with how to grow things like jasmine, clematis and honeysuckle so that you can cut them. "They can get very tangled, but there's lots of variety and potential for using them."

Standout varieties

When it's time to choose what you're growing, keep cut flowers in mind. Here are some top picks from Proven Winners, Monrovia and Plants Nouveau:

Natalie says, "I have some personal favorites for cut flower growers, starting with diervilla. These are what I'm talking about when I say interesting filler. They have long, straight branches, very good vase life and the Kodiak series comes in so many colors. This is a native species of bush honeysuckle, and once mature, provides ample, colorful stems."

She adds, "A brand new variety that I think deserves more attention, especially for cuts, is Powerball panicle hydrangea. Its blooms are dense and very rounded, making them an excellent substitute for big-leaf hydrangeas in wedding work. And because it blooms on new wood, it offers a reliable alternative in years when big-leaf hydrangea crops are lost or fail to flower, providing the rounded look designers want when Hydrangea macrophylla is called for."

Monrovia sent several sample plants along, but one stood out because everyone I interviewed for this article mentioned using more cotinus. Kathleen Hennessy wrote, "Lilla Smokebush is a bit of a curveball when it comes to cut flowers, but I love the foliage of this beautiful smokebush. Lilla is a dwarf form of Royal Purple. The pretty oval-shaped leaves are a deep burgundy in the summer, turning shades of red, orange and coral in the fall."

Angela couldn't stop naming plants. "There's so much happening in this area. We're seeing gorgeous symphoricarpos, especially the Magical series. Cotinus, *Hydrangea paniculatas*, physocarpus and these *Ilex verticillata* Magical series plants that are absolutely covered in berries." She adds that in the word of perennials, "Eryngium is having a moment."

The bottom line is, if you want to add to your bottom line, it's time to seriously investigate selling your nursery stock into the cut flower space. Money doesn't grow on trees, but it might just grow on shrubs. **GT**

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Standout Selections for Cut Flowers

Thanks to our colleagues for sending their top woody cut picks. Here are their favorites:

Spring Meadow Nursery

- Diervilla KODIAK series: For straight stems and colorful foliage (varies by variety)
- Viburnum Brandywine: 2024 Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers Woody Cut Flower of the Year
- Panicle Hydrangea Pinky Winky: 2023 Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers Woody Cut Flower of the Year (growers should look for the improved Pinky Winky Prime)
- Panicle Hydrangea Quick Fire: 2019 Association of Specialty Cut Flower Growers Woody Cut Flower of the Year (growers should look for Little Quick Fire or Quick Fire Fab)
- Panicle Hydrangea Limelight Prime: An improvement over the original Limelight Hydrangea with updates that are especially valuable for cut flower growers; this newer variety has a more upright habit and noticeably straighter stems, making it easier to harvest longer, stronger stems for cutting.

Plants Nouveau

- Symphoricarpos Magical series: White, peach, pink and bicolor types
- *Ilex verticillata* Magical series: Absolutely covered in berries
- *Hydrangea paniculata* Magical Lime Sparkle: Good medium-sized shrub with beautiful lacy flowers that change color throughout the season
- Cotinus Magical Purple: Consistent vertical branches with textural interest

Monrovia

- Hydrangea Centennial Ruby: A special release for Monrovia's 100th anniversary, this is the must-have plant of the season, they say. The flowers of this new variety are simply stunning, unlike anything seen before, with rich ruby-red mophead blooms that deepen in color as the long-lasting flowers age.
- Rose Eau De Parfum Bling: Monrovia's Eau De Parfum rose collection pairs the beauty and romance of fragrant blooms with easy care. Eau De Parfum Bling is a standout in the garden and in a vase with bright fuchsia flowers that are gorgeous in bud and in bloom. This hardy re-bloomer is disease resistant and easy to grow. The collection features five colors.
- Arabian Jasmine Summer Soul: This Arabian Jasmine features pretty, double blooms that have a beautiful scent. They fill the garden and a room full of fragrance.
- Peony Julia Rose Itoh: Peonies belong in a vase and Julia Rose Itoh Peony is a favorite. The soft apricot blooms glow in the garden and in arrangements. This selection also features a slightly spicy fragrance.
- FloralBerry St. John's Wort collection: Offers five colors to choose from, each with stunning fall berries.
- Smokebush Lilla: A dwarf form of Royal Purple, the pretty oval shaped leaves are a deep burgundy in the summer, turning shades of red, orange and coral in the fall.