

GROWERTALKS

Cover Story

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A Walk on the Woodies Side

Matthew Chappell

When the good folks at *GrowerTalks* called and asked if I would put together a quick read on any trends in the world of woody ornamentals (and throw in some new cultivars to boot), my initial response probably mirrored what many of you would think.

First and foremost, we pretty much let COVID-19 be the big news, latest (but certainly not the greatest) trend and the economic driver of 2020. So can we just forget about 2020 and spring of 2021 (minus the fantabulous sales) and hit the reset button on trends?

You may remember I wrote a similar article back in the [August 2019 issue of *GrowerTalks*](#). Lo and behold, when scrolling through plants covered in that article, the trends included breeding for (and releasing plants having) sterility, compactness, disease tolerance, pollinator-friendly traits and broad environmental (and soil) tolerance.

Now skip forward to the conversations I've had recently with folks, including Natalie Carmolli (Proven Winners ColorChoice Shrubs), Dr. Tom Ranney (North Carolina State University), Kevin Cramer (Van Belle Nursery), David Roberts (Bailey), Todd West (North Dakota State University), Corrina Murray (Sunset/Southern Living Plant Collection), Ryan Contreras (Oregon State University), Donglin Zhang (University of Georgia), and myself (I do talk to myself a lot since the quarantine). Not so shockingly, all of these folks point to those same pre-pandemic trends that seem to be holding in the world of woodies.

One emerging trend is using woodies to create outdoor rooms as an extension of the home, which makes sense considering we've spent a year trying to escape from our children by any means possible. The outdoor garden "rooms" concept has been popular for eons in areas with mild winters (think San Diego), but it's certainly catching on across the nation. It'll be interesting to see if this trend builds as we drive forward into 2022, but if so, we certainly have the new cultivars to make it happen.

Hydrangea Little Hottie (Bailey)

Let's start with compact and a fine new example is *Hydrangea paniculata* Little Hottie. Some of you plant geeks may know the old cultivar Dharuma, which for decades was the smallest panicle hydrangea (that I knew of), but also too slow growing and a magnet for several late-season foliar pathogens. Heck, it would take three years to finish a 3-gal. container in a nursery.

In steps Little Hottie at a similar size (3- to 4-ft. rounded), hardiness (Zones 2 to 7) and cultural needs (full sun to afternoon shade and moderate soil moisture). But in contrast to Dharuma, it finishes much quicker in a container and seems to have much better foliar disease tolerance in the landscape.

Holly Screen Play (Sunset/ Southern Living Plant Collection)

Now we checked the compact box with Little Hottie, but “compact” doesn’t always mean short. That’s right—even though “fastigiata” is a foreign term to me (personally) after the pandemic, fastigiata plants do allow the grower to squeeze more containers onto a pad and also afford some texture/focal areas to smaller urban landscapes.

Enter Holly Screen Play, a new fastigiata evergreen holly selection from Sunset/Southern Living Plant Collection. As outdoor rooms and dedicated garden spaces soar in popularity, this hybrid holly also offers a naturally full, upright habit, perfect for screening in smaller spaces. Screen Play’s soft, spineless leaves shine with vibrant green foliage tinged in bronze when it first emerges. A bumper crop of deep red berries in winter adds a colorful seasonal display. Towering at heights up to 20– to 30-ft. high by 8– to 10-ft. wide, Screen Play thrives in Zones 7 to 9 in full sun (and pretty much all soil conditions).

Birch Emerald Flare Tianshan (North Dakota State University)

Speaking of compact and upright, let’s not forget about the insanely compact trees coming out of Dr. Todd West’s breeding program at North Dakota State University! Emerald Flare Tianshan Birch (*Betula tianschanica*) is a very distinctive birch selection. At maturity it forms a narrowly pyramidal deciduous tree and attractive white exfoliating bark with gray and slight orange undertones. It’s hardy in Zones 3b to 6, thrives in full sun and reaches a mature size of 30 ft. by 12 ft.

It’s a tough birch, too, being drought and pH tolerant, resistant to bronze birch borer and birch leaf miner. It’s available from Evergreen Nursery Co. (Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin) and Baker’s Nursery (Bayfield, Ontario, Canada) right now.

Fothergilla Legend of the Small (North Carolina State University)

From Dr. Tom Ranney’s breeding program at NC State University comes a plant that checks the compact box, but also the native (to the eastern U.S.) and pollinator-friendly boxes as well. Fothergilla Legend of the Small is an advanced hybrid that effectively combines the small stature of *Fothergilla gardenii* with the larger flowers and spectacular fall color of *F. major* (and trust me, Dr. Ranney knows the difference between the two).

With a mature size of 24- to 30-in. tall and wide, it makes for a refined shrub for smaller spaces. It’s also a nifty little native with three seasons of interest. Legend of the Small flowers abundantly in the spring, providing pollinators a reliable source of nectar early in the season. In summer, its foliage is a peppy shade of bluish-green until it erupts into fantastic fall color. Every autumnal color you can think of blends together beautifully on its little frame, making this little guy a serious talking piece for your landscape.

Weigela Bloomin’ Easy Peach Kisses (Van Belle Nursery)

Van Belle Nursery’s Bloomin’ Easy collection has done it again, rocking one of my favorite old school taxa—weigela. In this case, it’s Peach Kisses Weigela that packs that lovely fragrance on a compact, but sturdy, frame. Like most weigela, it’s best in full to part sun across Zones 4 to 7. Mature size is about 2- to 3-ft. tall and wide. BUT (there’s always a but) what I love about this little gem is that like most Bloomin’ Easy introductions, it’s a rebloomer. I think you’d have to have been in quarantine a little too long not to love this weigela that’s loaded with peachy pink flowers all darn summer.

Lilac First Editions Pinktini (Bailey)

Then there’s my favorite plant that I simply can’t grow in Georgia’s sweltering Zone 8b—lilacs. In fact, I’m literally moving into Zone 7 and leaving the University of Georgia for Virginia Tech, specifically with the hope that I may one day site a lilac perfectly in Zone 7b and successfully grow it. I’ll also let you know that my first victim attempt will be

the newly released First Editions Pinktini. I have the perfect spot at my new Casa del Chappell picked out—a small courtyard that Pinktini will be perfect in, as it matures at only 4- to 5-ft. tall and 3- to 4-ft. wide.

Fragrant, rich pink flowers bloom in late spring and are accented by classic Preston lilac foliage. Bred in Canada, this cold hardy lilac is a cross between Charisma and Miss Canada, resulting in a more compact, tidier form of the latter with a hardiness range from Zone 2 to 7. (Wish me luck!)

Crapemyrtle Center Stage Pink (Proven Winners ColorChoice Shrubs)

I will preface this by saying that being a Georgia guy, I've keenly paid attention to every purple-foliaged crapemyrtle (one word, people, not two) that's hit the market. Most exit the market quickly due to poor mildew tolerance, yet generally introductions have been improving in disease tolerance. But, until recently, the foliage color wasn't purple enough for me. I want it to look almost black in full sun.

Well, Proven Winners is getting darn close to that mark with the Center Stage series. Vigorous and very floriferous, the newest cultivar in that series, Center Stage Pink, boasts brilliantly colored, hot pink flowers and intense reddish-black foliage. The breeding goal of the Center Stage crapes has been to bump up the bloom date, intensify the foliage color and reduce mildew. Breeder Megan Mathey seems to be elevating the offerings significantly and Center Stage Pink delivers.

Where it's hardy (Zone 7 to 9), it's pretty much bulletproof if sited in full sun and with a height of 6 to 12 ft. and width of 8 ft., it's a perfect "small tree" size. Now if only we could increase that cold hardiness into Zone 6 (no pressure, Megan). **GT**

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