



Shrubs: The "Bones" of Your Garden

by Susan Moore Sevier, UC Master Gardener

On a recent trip to England and Wales, I eagerly anticipated touring several gardens. Expecting to view long stretches of stylized formal grounds, I was delighted to find myself strolling through landscaped “rooms” with something of interest from every angle. The shrubs were used as the glue that held the mixed plantings together.

As we revise our own plantings due to the drought here in the Central Valley, we certainly can't plan for a typical English garden, but we can use shrubs to tie our garden together.

A shrub is much more than “a low multi-trunked woody plant” that is used to plop in the landscape between trees, flowers, and lawns. Once established, a shrub may be with you for life, unlike an easy-come, easy-go annual, especially in a sustainable, drought-tolerant garden. Shrubs can surprise us with their individuality, while manufacturing oxygen, mitigating noise, defining spaces and boundaries, and providing shelter and food for our winged friends.

Fall is an ideal time to plant shrubs in your yard. But before you do, there are several things to consider. The environmental placement in the sun or shade and the shrub's water requirements come first. Maybe you are planting shrubs as a border, or to create a space or outdoor “room,” and already know that size and height are important. Decide whether you prefer deciduous or evergreen shrubs and what that entails. Envision the mature shape and habitat, like an artist would, to create the look you want in your yard: be it mounding or weeping, upright or spreading, or a more formal upright look.



Ceanothus Concha



DT Shrubs

Consider not simply the contrast brought by the colors of the leaves, which can range from gold, bronze, blue-gray, and red to all the shades of green, but also their sizes, textures and shapes. The bark and branch structure of a deciduous shrub can be interesting too, especially during winter months after the leaves have dropped. Put your shrubs where each will be enjoyed the most, with groupings more pleasing to the eye than a series of one-of-a-kind. I always consider which plants are most attractive to butterflies, bees, and birds when choosing shrubs at the nursery.

Digging a hole twice the size of the root ball and applying mulch on top after planting are tasks more important than adding soil amendments. The water needs of a shrub will be greatest in its early months, but after it is established, it can prove to be very drought-tolerant. The use of a drip irrigation system will direct water to the root ball for the most economical use of your resources.

Your time commitment to pruning will be less than you think, as long as you don't "fight" with each shrub trying to make it something it is not. Familiarize yourself with its species and what to expect from it. Pruning at the proper time can enhance flower production. However, if you prune at the wrong time, you may have no flowers until next year. In most cases drastic pruning just encourages rank growth. Most shrubs grow larger and more beautiful each year, with no more than the removal of dead wood and a few cuts made to direct growth.

Here are some of my favorite shrubs, which require little water once established and can fit well into the scheme of any landscape:



Texas Ranger

- Carpinteria californica (Bush anemone), a native with fragrant white blossoms;
- Ceanothus (California lilac) another native with flowers in blues, lilacs and purples;
- Cotoneaster with showy red berries in winter;
- Dwarf crape myrtle, which has ruffled pink, red, or white flowers and interesting exfoliating bark;
- Euryops have yellow, daisy-like blooms, contrasting with dark green foliage;
- Myrtus (myrtle) is commonly used for a hedge;
- Dwarf oleander comes in a wide variety of colors and tolerates bad soil, hot sun and requires very little water, but is poisonous;
- Sweet olive has very fragrant, but tiny whitish blossoms;
- Cape plumbago has light blue phlox-like flowers;
- Pyracantha, has red berries that birds feast on;
- Coffeeberry, a California native, with red berries resembling coffee beans;
- Indian hawthorn, a small dense shrub with pink flowers;
- Texas ranger, a large, tough plant with gray or green leaves and purple or pinkish flowers;
- Red escallonia, showcasing sweetly scented white, pink or red blossoms;
- Rosemary, an aromatic shrub available in many flower colors, forms and uses.