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Features

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5 Unique Shrubs & Trees

Matthew Olson



Some plants have a way of flying off the shelves in spring, but that also comes with a risk. Many of those garden staples can be found at the big box store down the street. With the right messaging, you can help consumers see the benefits of unique, lesser-known plants. As you're looking for ways to stand out, consider adding these shrubs and a tree to your offerings.

Enchanted Forest Collection Pieris

When Sven Swenson began breeding with pieris, one of his goals was to find better resistance to azalea lacebug. His efforts were successful, but the series of plants he created also had an amazing flower display. Megan McConnell, Plant Information Director at Monrovia, shared why these plants are special.

Enchanted Forest Collection Sunsprite Pieris from Monrovia.

"They have abundant, big clusters and bloom for a long time. We're talking all of March and even into April," she said. "Sven's pieris test farm happens to be five minutes down the road from our nursery in Dayton, Oregon. Because of this, we were able to work closely with him and help select our favorite varieties."

In the landscape, pieris begins blooming earlier than rhododendrons, making them excellent companion plants. Since they bloom early, it's important for retailers to display them as soon as possible in spring.

"They start to develop flower buds in fall, and they're quite eye-catching and colorful, so they will add interest in your garden center all winter," Megan said. "If you have a sunny, warm day in February, you're going to be happy they're ready and waiting."

There are four colors in the Enchanted Forest Collection and they're all hardy to USDA Zones 6 to 8.

Steeplebush (*Spiraea tomentosa*)



As consumers focus on sustainability, the industry can respond by offering natives that fill a niche in the landscape. Steeplebush is one shrub that combines colorful blooms with functionality. Tim Kane, Brand Ambassador for American Beauties Native Plants, shared how these spirea elevate the landscape.

“This lesser-known native plant is a must-use for erosion control and moist meadow plantings. Its mid-summer bloom is noteworthy for its timing, injecting a jolt of color when many gardens can be in a lull,” Tim said. “The astilbe-like flowers are a magnet for attracting native bees and butterflies.”

Even when not in bloom, steeplebush is a host plant for pollinators and is deer-resistant. It’s hardy to Zones 3 to 8.

With its suckering habit, steeplebush is great for mass plantings and low hedges in commercial and residential sites. This spirea can be more subtle when it’s not blooming, but retailers can maximize its impact on the sales floor.

“Steeplebush is a rarity … a showy, summer-blooming shrub that is a great butterfly plant,” Tim said. “Use it to promote butterfly gardens in garden center displays or showcase it during bloom in an endcap.”

Spiraea tomentosa from American Beauties Native Plants.



Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*)

With globe-shaped flowers and impressive form, this is one of the best shrubs that most consumers haven’t heard of … yet. At 6- to 10-ft. tall and wide, it’s worth the space required to grow.

“The rounded form of buttonbush boasts great-looking, spear-like foliage that is a superb backdrop for what’s possibly the most unique flower you’ve seen on a shrub,” Tim explained. “It blooms from late May into summer and the flowers feature a creamy white globe attached to a short stem.”

The blooms not only look good, but they also attract pollinators and hummingbirds. Once the flowers fade, birds will enjoy feeding on the seeds in late summer and fall. Several selections of buttonbush are on the market, including Crimson Comet, which was discovered in Michigan and has crimson foliage in the fall landscape. The selections from American Beauties Native Plants are hardy to Zones 5 to 9.

Beyond the flowers, retailers can highlight their suitability for rain gardens and other sites with moist soil.

“When buttonbush blooms, there is nothing like it in the garden center,” Tim added. “Display it with other natives and plants that are pollinator powerhouses.”

Cephalanthus occidentalis from American Beauties Native Plants.

El NiÑo Desert Orchid

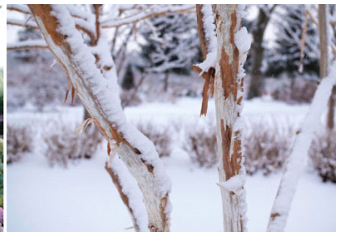
What's the result of crossing *Catalpa* sp. with a desert native called *Chilopsis linearis*? An easy-care shrub with intense fragrance and beautiful flowers named Chitalpa. Dr. Tom Ranney at North Carolina State University was on a mission to expand the range of chilopsis by creating mildew resistance, so he crossed the plant with catalpa. The result is an intergenetic hybrid that tolerates humidity and doesn't set seed. Stacey Hirvela, Marketing Manager for Proven Winners ColorChoice Shrubs, said it was unique.

"We saw a novel plant—something that was unlike anything on the market, especially in the eastern half of the U.S. and something with great ornamental potential, and it has already become very popular. There's always a market for fragrant plants!"

In retail, El Niño—hardy to Zones 6 to 9—is best promoted as a vigorous flowering hedge that tops out around 10- to 15-ft. tall with an 8- to 10-ft. spread. It's also a spring bloomer, allowing consumers to see and smell the flowers up close in retail.

"It's not one of those plants that you need to get up close to smell—its fragrance wafts pleasantly on the warm summer air," Stacey added.





Temple of Bloom Seven-Son Flower

When consumers need a specimen tree, they often prioritize flower power that can be short-lived. Seven-Son Flower (*Heptacodium miconioides*) offers interest year-round, including showy blooms. Despite the tree's outstanding appearance, few cultivars have been available to growers and the public. Proven Winners took notice and began creating new selections to improve an already unique tree.

Those results were consistent in several years of trialing and their grower network was also excited about Temple of Bloom. While the tree doesn't bloom in spring, retailers can market it as a specimen with four-season beauty. This small stature flowering tree is hardy to Zones 5 to 9.

Above left: Chitalpa El Niño from Proven Winners ColorChoice Shrubs. **Above right:** *Heptacodium miconioides* Temple of Bloom from Proven Winners ColorChoice Shrubs.

"It brings flowers to the landscape when few other things are in peak bloom, and the hummingbirds and butterflies love them," Stacey said. "With its peeling bark, it does one better than your average crabapple or cherry."

Additionally, the plant tags for Temple of Bloom have three images showing its features in each season. As the saying goes, "A picture is worth a thousand words." **GP**

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