



Small Plants for the Small Garden

Gardening in Our Urban Spaces

BY JULIE OLSON

We can all relate to this gardening woe: You bring a plant home from the nursery, plant it in your garden, and a few years later it resembles something out of “Little Shop of Horrors.” Our small urban gardens can’t always handle the large-sized plants that our suburban friends have. The trick to landscaping your yard successfully is to first understand how big that tiny shrub or tree in the nursery pot will get in a few years and whether it will eventually be too large for your space. A mixture of shrubs and ornamental trees, along with herbaceous perennials, grasses and ground covers, should form the bulk of our Capitol Hill gardens. The right mix of plants can add beauty to your outdoor space and increase the value of your home, if planned appropriately. A professional landscape designer can help you visualize your yard, put the right plant in the right place, at the right scale. This is a small investment in planning and resources that will go a long way to help you realize a garden space you can admire and enjoy, without the frustration of money and time spent on eventual monsters that need to be removed or continually pruned to be kept in check.

Smaller plants that are correctly scaled to our gardens are many, but here are some personal favorites.

Trees

Although there is nothing more beautiful than a gigantic Southern Magnolia (*Magnolia grandiflora*), it needs a large garden to show it at its best. The best trees for our yards are the smaller, ornamental kinds, such as Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*), Shadblow Serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*), Japanese Stewartia (*Stewartia pseudocamellia*) or Eastern Redbud (*Cercis canadensis*). These trees stay under 25 feet tall, with some cultivars topping out at 10-15 feet, and won’t pull up your patio with their roots.

Everyone’s favorite local tree, the Crape Myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*) – many of which were bred at the nearby National Arboretum – include a range of cultivar sizes from the 20-25 foot tall ‘Natchez,’ with its white blooms and peeling cinnamon-colored bark, to the 2-3 foot tall ‘Pocomoke.’

Shrubs

The urban answer to the often too-large Forsythia is lovely Japanese Kerria (*Kerria japonica*), which tolerates some shade and bursts with yellow blooms in spring and sporadically throughout the summer. Small shrubs for sun include Japanese

Spirea (*Spiraea japonica* or *Spiraea x bumalda*) cultivars, such as ‘Goldflame’ with golden foliage and pink flowers, ‘Shibori,’ with white, pink and dark pink flowers on the same plant, and the diminutive ‘Little Princess.’

A popular shrub for shade is Bigleaf Hydrangea, but the well-known *Hydrangea macrophylla* ‘Nikko Blue’ can grow up to 6 feet tall and wide and is difficult to keep in check through pruning. As an alternative, plant a real dwarf like *Hydrangea macrophylla* ‘Pia,’ which reaches 2 feet, or ‘Glowing Embers’ at 3-4 feet. For an Oakleaf Hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*), use the cultivar ‘Pee Wee.’

Evergreen shrubs look great year-round. Dwarf Nandinas (*Nandina domestica* ‘Firepower’ or ‘Harbor Dwarf’) can handle shade. Sun-lovers such as Japanese Holly (*Ilex crenata*), with the upright, narrow cultivar ‘Sky Pencil’ or the low-growing Japanese Plum Yew (*Cephalotaxus harringtonia*) add a formal touch.

Perennials

Shrubs and trees give structure to the garden, but perennials can add texture and color, so they are a good addition to our small yards, and not as high maintenance as one would think. For sun, Cone-



Japanese Kerria (*Kerria japonica* ‘Golden Guinea’) has beautiful yellow flowers in spring, reaches 4-5 feet tall and wide, and as a bonus has lime-green arching stems in winter.



A rich texture of plants includes structural deciduous shrubs, like dwarf Crape Myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica* ‘Pocomoke’) (Front left), lush perennials, and softer but still small shrubs like ‘Neon Flash’ Spirea (with pink flowers).



Evergreen Crossvine (*Bignonia capreolata*) has orange trumpet flowers like Trumpet Vine (*Campsis radicans*), but not nearly as invasive.

flowers (Echinacea purpurea), Black-eyed Susans (Rudbeckia sp.) and Catmint (Nepeta x faassenii 'Walkers Low') – the Perennial Plant Association's 2007 Perennial Plant of the Year – are low maintenance, grow rapidly and attract bees and butterflies. Shade perennials such as Coral Bells (Heuchera sp.) are grown mostly for their colored foliage in shades of green, purple, wine, lime green or orange. Lenten Rose (Helleborus x orientalis) forms a beautiful 18-24-inch evergreen clump and blooms late winter well into spring.

Grasses

Grasses are wonderful for multi-season interest, but many can get too tall and wide for our gardens. Some alternatives to fit more narrow spaces include Variegated Feather Reed Grass (Calamagrostis acutiflora 'Overdam') or Hamelin Dwarf Fountain Grass (Pennisetum alopecuroides 'Hamelin'). The diverse and shade-loving Sedges (Carex sp.) have grass-like foliage in green, blue, variegated, golden and even brown (seriously).

Vines

Vines can soften the edges of our backyard fences. Instead of the highly invasive Trumpet Vine (Campsis radicans), try Crossvine (Bignonia capreolata), an evergreen vine with orange trumpet flowers that are stunning in late spring. The deciduous Sweet Autumn Clematis (Clematis paniculata) has sweetly-scented small white flowers on delicate foliage. With some research online or at your local nursery, or by hiring a professional, you can create a well thought out garden that fits your small space without overwhelming it, saving you time, frustration and money in the process.

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