



Way to Grow in Orinda

Spring Flowering Heirloom Shrubs Add Some Mid-level Eye Candy to your Garden

Steve & Cathy Lambert



February is a great time of year to begin exploring spring-flowering shrubs that can broaden the appeal of your garden. Regardless of your property size, shrubs fill a valuable niche between ground layer plants and flowers and your tree canopy. They can provide a pleasant backdrop for herbaceous perennials, help define your properties borders and create screens for hiding fences or undesirable views. These mid-level plants can add a focal point to your garden, and enhance the character of foundation plantings around your home.

In Northern California, we are privileged to have a mild climate that allows flowering shrubs to bloom over a long period of time. Since this category of plants is so large, we'll narrow it down to a list of our favorites. To make our list, the shrub must: perform well in our Orinda microclimate, be low maintenance, be somewhat drought tolerant, deer resistant, and have the proper chill requirements.

The earliest bloomer is the Winter Daphne of which there are 150 varieties. Most daphnes have an incredible fragrance and bloom for four to five weeks. The most popular daphne, *Odorata*, is an evergreen which grows in a rounded form and has a solid green leaf. *Odorata* "Marginata" has a beautifully variegated leaf with yellow margins and rosy-pink flower buds that open to white. Reaching four-feet in both height and width, it's beautiful against a wall or near a patio or deck where its fragrance can be appreciated.

Another heirloom shrub often seen in Orinda is *Chaenomeles*, or the Flowering Quince. Very drought tolerant and somewhat deer resistant, the quince is an old fashion shrub with a dark reddish-orange bloom that can survive with years of neglect. The leaves on this shrub are a dark, bronze-green and sometimes produce a yellow-green fruit which can be used for jelly. Besides the red-orange flowering varieties, such as "Cardinalis," there are also quinces with blooms of white, deep pink, coral and salmon. One notable va-

riety *Toyo-Nishiki*, has varying shades of red, pink and white, all on one plant. All types of quince prefer full sun and are not fussy about soil. Tall varieties of flowering quince can be trained like a wisteria or grapevine to cover a wall or trellis, while lower-growing quinces work well as a border style shrub. Quince stems can easily be forced for great cut flower displays, which have the lore of bringing good fortune during Chinese New Year.

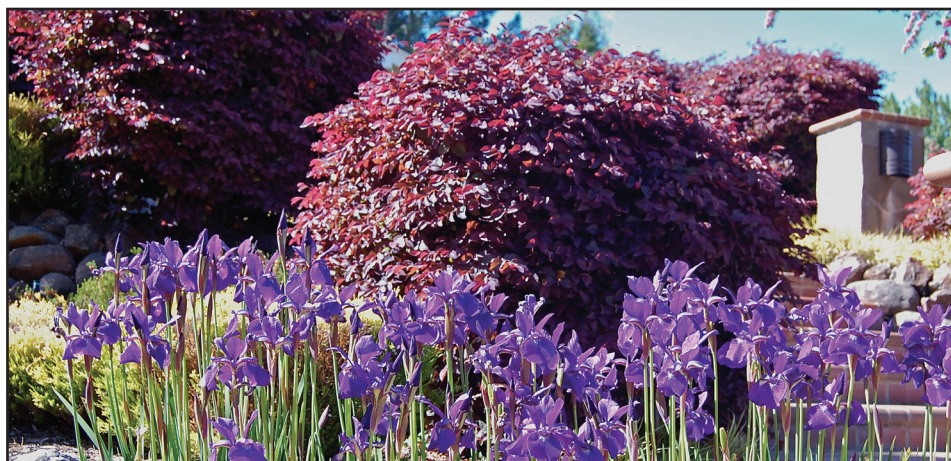
Up until about 10 years ago, the *Loropetalum* (Chinese fringe flower) was known by very few people aside from horticulturists. In the last few years, however, this plant has grown from obscurity to common place among landscape plants. *Loropetalum* comes in several varieties; some with green foliage and white flowers such as *Snow Dance* to the dark purple foliage and bright pink flowers of *Fire Dance* and *Pipas Red*. There are also varieties such as *Razzelberry* and *Blush* that have both green and purple foliage with pink flowers. This plant is an evergreen that is deer resistant and fairly easy to grow.

Current varieties of the Chinese fringe flower range in mature heights from four to 15 feet tall and wide. Often times, these are chosen by homeowners and even some designers for their beautiful flowers

without consideration to their growth potential. If a large growth variety *Loropetalum* is planted where there is space for a three-to four foot shrub, it takes constant pruning to keep it that size. We see way too many of these beautiful plants butchered into unnatural shapes such as boxes, meatballs, or lollipops. Flowering of the *Loropetalum* is heaviest in the spring but some intermittent blooms can occur anytime of the year.

Lilacs, a common spring flowering plant on the east coast, have traditionally needed colder winters than ours to produce a bounty of blooms. Because of their popularity as an heirloom garden shrub, plant breeders in Southern California have been creating varieties of lilacs that will perform well in our climate. Many of these fall into a group know as the *Descanso* hybrids. Although lilacs bring to mind a grape-bunch shaped bloom of light purple (the color itself was named after early lilacs) these new lilacs come in a range of colors from white to dark purple.

Spiraea prunifolia, usually called *Spiraea* or False Bridal Wreath, produces white lacy flowers often used in old-fashioned wedding bouquets. Grown in zones 4-9, this small Eastern Asian shrub, blooms in mid-spring and if taken care of properly, will bloom sporadically throughout the year. Its tiny (1/2 inch) double rows of white petals borne on graceful, upright branches stay on the bush for about four weeks in the spring. In autumn, the slender leaves turn a lustrous orange and add great fall color to your yard. This shrub thrives in full sun or light shade, requires soil with good drainage, and is moderately drought tolerant. There are several other varieties of *Spiraea* that do well in our area



STEVE LAMBERT

Loropetalum is a colorful spring flowering shrub that nicely sets off the Iris plants in front for a colorful spring garden.

and bloom all summer.

Another old fashioned flowering shrub that's getting the attention of plant breeders and gardeners alike is Weigelia. This graceful heirloom shrub with arching branches and lovely, bell-shaped blooms will attract both hummingbirds and butterflies to your garden. Grown in landscapes since the 1800's this deciduous shrub comes in many sizes, forms and colors. The largest Weigelia can be trained as a flowering tree. It has tri-colored blooms exploding like fireworks in white, pink and fuchsia. Another favorite is Wine and Roses, which has purple foliage with dark pink blooms. Rubidor has bright chartreuse foliage and red flowers which is great for livening up a lightly shaded area in your garden.

Deutzias, a large arching shrub, have long been looked upon as an undesirable landscape plant because they can take up too much space. They're now making a come back with new varieties which make it much easier to find a place for them in your garden. One of our favorite large deutzias is Magician. It has a very unique flower bud which is dark pink with a white star, these open up to white flowers with pink brush strokes on each petal. Dwarf varieties include Nikko, with pure white pompom flowers covering medium green leaves, and the newest one Chardonnay Pearls, which has yellow green foliage adorned with white bell like flowers.

All of the flowering heirloom shrubs mentioned above are relatively easy to maintain and bloom on last season's growth (wood) so the very best time to prune them is after they're done blooming. Unfortunately, many gardeners prune these in the fall cutting off a large portion of their potential new blooms.

If you have specific questions about this topic or suggestions for future articles, email office@gardenlightslandscape.com.