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News Release

### **Adding plants to existing landscapes**

**Question:** I'm interested in adding a few plants to my landscape, but would rather go for something "different." I have a mix of sun and shade, so I can look at a variety of plant materials. Fragrance, fall color, comfortable with our yo-yo weather patterns – these are criteria I'd like to include in my selections. So, where do I start looking and where can I buy these plants? Oh, mostly trees and shrubs, please.

**Answer:** Fortunately, you do have options when shopping for additions to your landscape. Also fortunately, the list of possibilities is quite lengthy so you may need to also think about mature size, maintenance requirements, attraction to wildlife, etc. to help narrow the list. Choosing new additions to your landscape is like buying new furniture for your living room; new looks, new colors, textures, and combinations are possible.

You mentioned 'mostly trees and shrubs.' Good choices for many reasons, but primarily because these two categories contain the most "permanent" plants. Trees are planted for the long term, shrubs for the mid-term, and perennials, herbs, bulbs, and others are usually short term. Annuals are called "instant delight," but they too fill a niche in gardens that nothing else can. Plastic plants don't count! One reminder if planting in the spring: getting roots well-established is a primary concern, so if you are installing trees or shrubs this time of year, be very careful about keeping sufficient water on them as our summers can get really hot and/or dry.

Fragrant trees appeal to our sense of sight and smell. We know about Magnolias, but what about Fringe tree (*Chionanthus virginicus*) or Grancy Greybeard, as the locals call them? And one of my all-time favorites, classified as a small tree or large shrub, is the evergreen Sweet or Tea Olive (*Osmanthus fragrans*). It produces very tiny, very fragrant blossoms whose perfume wafts about on breezes and causes passersby to sniff the air like Beagle puppies attempting to locate the source of that "perfume." Another great tree that boasts lightly fragrant flowers, stunning fall color, and is beloved by honey bees is the Sourwood or Lily-of-the-Valley tree (*Oxydendrum arboreum*). Although considered slower growing than some, this native is an outstanding selection as a "specimen" tree in the landscape, or as border trees near a wooded area.

What constitutes great fall color to me may not be the same as to you, but one tree that most agree is "outstanding in its field" is Ginkgo or Maidenhair tree (*Ginkgo biloba*). Its unique, fan-shaped leaves turn a stop-in-your-tracks yellow in fall, even creating traffic jams on well-traveled streets. The only caveat regarding this tree is to be sure to plant a male, as the odorous

fruits borne by the female are considered offensive to some. Reds, maroons, rusts, and burgundy hues can all be found in the Maple genus. Choose from a range of more than a dozen varieties of these trees, plant them singly as specimens or groups for oh-my-gosh oomph; they range from weeping to upright to lace-leaf, and small to large. With so many choices it's hard to choose.

Shrubs, sometimes defined as “multi-trunked small trees,” have a place in our landscapes and where space is limited. They may even take the place of trees. Choices range from old-fashioned to native to exotic, and as with trees, they come in an assortment of fragrances, great fall colors, outstanding blooms, and the like.

A few that may be familiar, but not seen as often as they should or could be, include Hibiscus (I learned these as “Hot biscuits”), and Deutzia (*gracilis* or hybrid). And what would a partially sunny or semi-shady area be without one of more of our native azaleas? Although hybrid azaleas tend to be showier, Rhododendrons include a list of their relatives, who glow in the landscape, but with a softer flame. *Rhododendron* ‘Admiral Semmes’ (fragrant), *R. alabamense*, (highly fragrant), *R. austrinum* (fragrant), *R. canescens* or Piedmont azalea (fragrant), and *R. flammeum* (heat and drought tolerant) are but a partial list of truly wonderful but often under- appreciated shrubs.

Many nurseries in this area carry many of these plants; you'll need to do some calling around to find out who has what. Another option is to visit the Birmingham Botanical Gardens Spring Plant Sale that runs from April 15<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup> at the former Food World in Vestavia Hills Shopping Center. There you will find most trees and shrubs mentioned in this article, plus several hundred that weren't.

For more information about this topic or other horticulture related questions, please contact Sallie Lee, Urban Regional Extension Agent at the St. Clair County Extension office by calling (205) 338-9416 or email [leesall@aces.edu](mailto:leesall@aces.edu).



Piedmont Azalea (*Rhododendron canescens*)