

## Late Bloomers

### Part 2: Autumn's Shrubs

by *Honey Sharp*

"In the garden, Autumn is, indeed the crowning glory of the year, bringing us the fruition of months of thought and care and toil. And at no season, save perhaps in Daffodil time, do we get such superb colour effects as from August to November."  
Rose G. Kingsley, "The Autumn Garden", 1905

"You ought to know that October is the first Spring month."  
Karel Capek

In giving praise to fall's blooming perennials in September's Berkshire HomeStyle, I failed to mention the many gorgeous native wild flowers that adorn our fields, wetlands and roads come early autumn. Although I didn't overlook one of my very favorites: the tall and indomitable dusty pink-colored Joe Pye Weed (*Eupatorium*), mauve and deep purple asters and sunny goldenrod (*Solidago*) were left by the wayside.

Did I say "goldenrod" - that showy plant that displays no sense of compunction showing up in any available vacuum come late summer? Popular in well-groomed British cottage gardens (no this is not an oxymoron: cottage gardens do require a lot of work, it deserves a place in our own.

Upon discovering what we relegate to weed status is alternately deemed "ornamentally legitimate" just over the Atlantic, no doubt often shifts our perspective. And it works both ways. Recently, upon visiting one of my all favorite botanical gardens, Wave Hill, majestically overlooking the Hudson River and the Palisades, I discovered a stand of *Solidago* (just using the Latin term raises the notch a bit...), rubbing shoulders verbenas, dahlias, nicotiana, you name it...

And, when it comes to value, the often overlooked plants turn out to be the most highly beneficial to wildlife. "Goldenrod", explains Raina Weber, the director of Project Native in Housatonic, Massachusetts "is crucial for late pollinators such as honey bees and migrating butterflies." Fortunately, this happy native is not shy: I can't help but see it from my window carpeting the fields.

As we and the many tourists now flocking to our hills well know, October is show time. As Ella Baff from Jacob's Pillow might say if she were referring to nature: "Let's bloom!"

I'm not talking about flowers though- although exceptions exist, one of which I'll mention below - but leaves. On the verge of fading, this is their peak time. One can't help but think how their flaming ambers, crimsons and tangerines rival any petals on a summer canna or a spring tulip.

But first, why do deciduous leaves change in color? Not due to cooler weather, it's a function of decreased daylight and the chemical changes that ensue. During summer, a leaf's green color results from a group of chlorophylls (from the Greek: chloros or green and phyllon or leaf) which dominate and mask out other color pigments inherent to the leaf. Known as carotenoids, these pigments provide the shades of yellows and reds come fall. As chlorophylls, vital for the process of photosynthesis that allows plants to obtain energy from light (one of nature's great feats), gradually diminishes, "unveiled" carotenoids take the stand. The process is slow: inspecting a leaf, you will notice how its vein, responsible for water and mineral intake, remains green the longest.

In the same manner that I explored last month lesser known fall perennials, I'd like to delve

into a few of the shrub world's unsung heroes. Although some are native such as spice bush, others, such as *Spirea Ogon* 'Mellow Yellow', are exciting new varieties that have more recently come upon the market. And most woody plants, if not all, are great candidates for a range of color from the flamboyant to the more subtle.

While desperately seeking an alternative to the common, prevalent and invasive burning bush, a few years ago, I came upon some highly worthy candidates. While the burning bush's hot pink, burgundy leaves knock your eyes out while driving by a gas station, the species, like the barberry, is no longer available in many nurseries due to its invasive status. On my own property, I've eliminated all but one. The honeysuckle shrubs are another matter...

The first alternative to which I was introduced was *Itea* 'Henry's Garnet' or Virginia sweetspire. And sweet is it. Found in nature along shady stream banks, it sports delicate cream colored, fragrant flowers in June and lustrous green leaves throughout summer. By fall, it turns shades of scarlet purple and crimson. Although sweetspires tend to send out annoying suckers, they can be easily yanked out. The shrub also responds well to selective pruning.

*Enkianthus*, originally from Japan, presents an attractive, well contained, upright architectural shape throughout the year. While the larger and more commercially available one is the redvein variety, a smaller, more delicate version, called white enkianthus (for its delicate white bell-shaped flowers) also exists. Come fall its long-lasting scarlet red leaves and fuchsia stems are a delight.

For both leaf color as well as attractive berries, I am a fan of the native *Aronia melanocarpa* or black chokeberry, whose superior "elata" variety offers large clusters of dark berries. While a red chokeberry also exists (but tends to be more leggy), I prefer the black version, which although shunned by birds - hence the term "chokeberry" - works best in a grouping. Where space is available, say at the base of a sunny driveway, it makes for an elegant statement, particularly when paired with variegated red-osier dogwood or a white birch. Finally, the berries last a long time probably simply because that they are not bird friendly.

And now for one of very my favorites: *Spirea ogon* 'Mellow Yellow'. From early summer through fall, it is nothing but a show stopper. Although at its peak in fall with its flamingo leaves, its narrow-shaped remain luminescent lemon-yellow throughout the earlier growing season. (Where is the chlorophyll?) Although a sun plant, it resembles in color the shade lover Japanese grass, *Hakeonochloa*. Since 'Mellow Yellow' bears no obvious flowers, one would never imagine it to be a *Spirea*. Still, you can treat it in the same manner by cutting it way back in spring so that it remains nice and compact.

And now for the fall blooming woody plant. *Hamamelis virginiana* (not to be confused with the vernal or spring witchhazel) is the candidate. Seemingly to emerge out of the blue, its discrete yellow flowers appear from late October through December. While its large, oval leaves are turning color and dropping, its small, almost inconspicuous flowers make for a striking surprise. As the days are growing shorter and all is now fading, witchhazel reminds us that indeed, "October is the first Spring month."