



Outstanding Ornamentals

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This article isn't about the newest "cream of the crop" annual or perennial species. We will not be discussing the latest, greatest, vegetatively propagated annuals that will fly off your benches, either. This article is about the "dark side" of ornamentals...the woody shrubs and trees, groundcovers and vines. Before you turn the page, think about how many times you've been asked "Do you have azaleas?" during the height of spring sales, or "Do you carry hydrangeas?" in June. Your immediate reaction is to reply, "No, we just sell annuals and perennials", leaving many customers empty-handed.

As grower-retailers, we often think of ourselves as greenhouse growers and delineate our businesses from nurseries. The floriculture industry has segregated itself from nurserymen for several reasons: because outdoor production is entirely different from greenhouse production, because the two groups use very different media and fertilizers, and because "that's the way it's always been done". But, to the average consumer, flowers are flowers, whether they're on magnolias or marigolds, dogwoods or dianthus.

Woody plants are no less beautiful than snapdragons or mums, and they can add not only diversity but also fragrance, height, and seasonal color.

Of course, no grower-retailer has time or space to produce woody plants in addition to annuals, perennials, herbs, container gardens, hanging baskets, vegetables, potted plants, succulents, tropicals and foliage. However, it may be possible to purchase flowering shrubs and trees from nursery wholesalers and place them in strategic locations that are highly visible and shoppable.

The best way to add woody plants to a greenhouse operation is to start small. Focus on the plants that will be in bloom during your peak sales periods. Before the last frost date, shrubs can provide a means of establishing your business as the place to shop for the remainder of the spring and summer season. Forsythia, quince, and the early-blooming spireas are in high demand, along with the ubiquitous azalea. Less well-known shrubs include white forsythia (*Abeliophyllum distichum*), Burkwood viburnum (*Viburnum x burkwoodii*), and snowball bush (*Viburnum opulus*).

Trees are also important to sales. Dogwoods are an obvious choice, as are redbuds and weeping cherries, but other spectacular spring bloomers can be included in your lineup. Buckeyes (*Aesculus* spp.) bloom in red or creamy yellow, and the new foliage of red Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) and purple smoketree (*Cotinus coggygia* 'Velvet Cloak') is hard to beat.



Creative combinations of annuals, perennials, and woody plants in the retail setting can add color, height, and fragrance.

Don't forget vines. Everybody wants wisteria while it's in bloom, and clematis is another good choice because of its many colors. Jasmine (*Gelsemium rankinii*) is appropriate for Southern gardens. Groundcovers that bloom are few and far between, and nurserymen often overlook this critical aspect of the landscape. Many greenhouse growers already have vinca or ajuga on hand, but consider adding wintergreen (*Gaultheria procumbens*).

Some of you might already be selling woody plant materials, such as hydrangea or butterfly bush that bloom primarily in summer, with much success. Adding more woody plants like crape myrtles and abelias enhances your diversity and provides those much-needed summer sales. One plant that is best left to specialists and mass marketers is roses. These high-maintenance plants can be a nuisance to busy greenhouse growers.

With the advent of fall, many gardeners return to the greenhouse looking for pansies, snapdragons, or poinsettias. There are lots of woody plants that have spectacular fall displays. Whether it's the dark red foliage of burning bush (*Euonymus alatus*), the metallic purple fruit of beautyberry (*Callicarpa* spp.), or just the cooler temperatures, gardeners are reinvigorated and re-inspired during fall. Furthermore, fall is the best time to plant woody plants.

Crabapples can be displayed in spring for their flowers, but the fruit lasts much longer and gives retailers a longer sales season. One little-known tree that is especially marketable in fall is katsura (*Cercidophyllum japonicum*), the foliage of which smells exactly like cotton candy. It's hard to resist the smell of sugar in the landscape.

Cotoneasters make good groundcovers and are fruiting in the autumn. Vines like Boston ivy (*Parthenocissus tricuspidata*) and Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) are beginning to turn beautiful shades of red, orange, and scarlet, and a prominent display of these will not last long in any retail setting.

Table 1 offers a list of common and not-so-common woody plants recommended for specific sales periods geared for the grower-retailer. The table focuses on plants that have exceptional flowering, fruiting, or other colorful attributes. Botanical names are provided because they are frequently used among nurserymen. Ornamental characteristics are also listed to give an idea of colors that will blend well with your inventory of herbaceous plants. The hardiness zone given is the upper limit for the woody plant, so base your woody lineup on those plants that will perform well in your climate. Light requirements are given so that woody plants

can be placed in sunny or shady retail areas, and this will help educate your customers as to the plant's preference for light.

Don't let the newness of woody plants keep you from adding them to your retail sales. Although there are many books on woody plants available, the best source for most needs is Michael Dirr's Manual of Woody Landscape Plants. Be sure to have a copy of this excellent reference in the sales area.

Keys to Selling Woody Plants

- Use as much color as possible. Buy only those cultivars that are in full bloom or fruit during your busy sales periods.
- Display the woodies along with the herbaceous plants. Whether this is done in a display garden, or arranged on tiered benches to show



Japanese apricot belongs to the same family as cherry trees, but this beauty blooms at least a month earlier.

Table 1. Suggested woody trees, shrubs, vines, and groundcovers, grouped by sales season.

<i>Early Spring Sales</i>					
Plant Name	Type	Ornamental Characteristics	Hardiness Zone	Light Requirements	Comments
Azalea (<i>Rhododendron</i> spp.) 'Gumpo' (Deep South) 'Girard' (cold hardy) 'Kurume'	Shrub	Flowers in white, red, pink, purple, and salmon	Gumpo – 7 Girard – 5 (6) Kurume – 6	Shade to part shade	Gumpo grows well in the Deep South. Girards and Kurumes are somewhat more cold hardy.
Forsythia (<i>Forsythia x intermedia</i>)	shrub	Yellow flowers	5	Sun to part sun	Blooms about the same time as quince. Fast growth rate. Ultimate height 8-10 feet.
Flowering quince (<i>Chaenomeles japonica</i>)	Shrub	White, salmon, pink, and dark pink flowers	4	Sun to part sun	Very early bloom. Thorny branches.
Japanese pieris (<i>Pieris japonica</i>)	Shrub	White or pink flowers	5	Shade to part shade	Pendulous flowers.
Cherries (<i>Prunus</i> spp.)	Tree	Pink or white flowers	5	Sun	Weeping forms are especially noticeable. Double or single flower forms.
Eastern redbud (<i>Cercis canadensis</i>)	Tree	Pink-purple flowers	4	Sun to part sun	Flowers before foliage appears.
Wisteria (<i>Wisteria sinensis</i>)	Vine	Purple, pink, or white flowers	5	Sun to part sun	Extremely vigorous vine. Very fragrant.
<i>Mid-Spring Sales</i>					
Plant Name	Type	Ornamental Characteristics	Hardiness Zone	Light Requirements	Comments
Red Japanese maple (<i>Acer palmatum</i> or <i>A. palmatum dissectum</i>)	Tree	Red foliage	5	Sun to part sun	Beautiful color contrasts well with spring green, white, and blue-purples. Fine leaf texture.
Vanhoutte spirea (<i>Spirea x vanhouttei</i>)	Shrub	White flowers	3	Sun to part sun	Old-fashioned shrub.
Azalea (<i>Rhododendron</i> spp.) 'Exbury'	Shrub	Orange and yellow flowers	7	Part sun	Deciduous azalea. Fragrant flowers.
Common lilac (<i>Syringa vulgaris</i>)	Shrub	Purple or white flowers	3	Sun to part sun	Extremely fragrant.
Slender deutzia (<i>Deutzia gracilis</i> 'Nikko')	Shrub (2')	White flowers	4	Sun to part sun	Groundcover-type mounding shrub.
Scotch broom (<i>Cytisus scoparius</i>)	Shrub	Yellow or white flowers	5	Sun to part sun	Slender stems. Pea-like flowers.

Flowering dogwood (<i>Cornus florida</i>)	Tree	White or pink flowers	5	Sun to part sun	Attractive red fruit in fall. <i>C. rutgerensis</i> hybrids are less susceptible to dogwood anthracnose.
Clematis (<i>Clematis</i> spp.)	Vine	White, purple, red, or pink flowers	3	Sun to part sun	Large ornamental flowers.
Doublefile viburnum (<i>Viburnum plicatum</i> var. <i>tomentosum</i>)	Shrub	White flowers	5	Sun to part sun	Horizontal branching habit.

Mother's Day Sales

Plant Name	Type	Ornamental Characteristics	Hardiness Zone	Light Requirements	Comments
Mockorange (<i>Philadelphus coronarius</i>)	Shrub	White flowers	4	Sun to part sun	Flowers may be fragrant. Old-fashioned shrub.
Japanese kerria (<i>Kerria japonica</i>)	Shrub	Yellow flowers	4	Part shade	Bright green leaves. Medium-green showy stems.
Rhododendron (<i>Rhododendron</i> spp.)	Shrub	White, red, purple, or pink flowers	4	Shade to part shade	Showy flowers. Large evergreen leaves.
Weigela (<i>Weigela florida</i>)	Shrub	Pink, red, or white flowers	4	Sun to part sun	Trumpet-shaped flowers.
Burkwood daphne (<i>Daphne x burkwoodii</i>)	Shrub	White flowers	4	Sun to part sun	Fragrant flowers.
Beautybush (<i>Kolkwitzia amabilis</i>)	Shrub	Pink flowers	4	Sun to part sun	Dramatic floral display.
Fuzzy deutzia (<i>Deutzia scabra</i>)	Shrub	White or pink flowers	5	Sun to part sun	Old-fashioned shrub.
Koreanspice viburnum (<i>Viburnum x carlesii</i>)	Shrub	Pink flowers	4	Sun to part sun	Extremely fragrant.
Japanese spirea (<i>Spiraea japonica</i>)	Shrub	Pink flowers	5	Sun to part sun	Dainty shrub.

Memorial Day Sales

Plant Name	Type	Ornamental Characteristics	Hardiness Zone	Light Requirements	Comments
Nippon spirea (<i>Spiraea nipponica</i>)	Shrub	White flowers	3	Sun to part sun	Vase shaped form with arching branches.
Bumald spirea (<i>Spiraea x bumalda</i>)	Shrub	Pink flowers	3	Sun to part sun	Yellow or dark green foliage. Flowers sporadically throughout summer.

Butterfly bush (<i>Buddleia davidii</i>)	Shrub	Purple, pink, or white flowers	5	Sun	Fragrant flowers held on arching branches.
Trumpet creeper (<i>Campsis radicans</i>)	Vine	Orange, salmon, or yellow flowers	4	Sun to part sun	Vigorous vine.
Glossy abelia (<i>Abelia x grandiflora</i>)	Shrub	White or pink flowers	6	Sun to part sun	Flowers until frost.
Goldenraintree (<i>Koelreuteria paniculata</i>)	Tree	Yellow flowers	5	Sun to part sun	Attractive pods that fade from greenish-yellow to brown.
P.G. hydrangea (<i>Hydrangea paniculata</i>)	Shrub	White to pink flowers	3	Sun to part sun	Large flowers that fade to pink, then brown.
Bigleaf hydrangea (<i>Hydrangea macrophylla</i>)	Shrub	Pink or blue flowers	6	Shade to part shade	Large showy flowers.
Crape myrtle (<i>Lagerstroemia indica</i>)	Shrub/Tree	Pink, fuchsia, red, purple, or white flowers	4-6	Sun to part sun	Treat as a herbaceous shrub.
			7-9	Sun to part sun	Market the dwarf species with herbaceous plants, perhaps in containers.
Labor Day to Halloween Sales					
Plant Name	Type	Ornamental Characteristics	Hardiness Zone	Light Requirements	Comments
Washington hawthorn (<i>Crataegus phaenopyrum</i>)	Tree	Glossy red fruit	3	Sun to part sun	Thorny branches. White flowers in spring.
Beautyberry (<i>Callicarpa</i> spp.)	Shrub	Purple or white fruit	5	Sun to part sun	Yellow fall foliage. Prettiest when defoliated.
Blue-mist spirea (<i>Caryopteris x clandonensis</i>)	Shrub	Blue flowers	6	Sun to part sun	Gray-green foliage.
Scarlet firethorn (<i>Pyracantha coccinea</i>)	Shrub	Orange-red berries	6	Sun to part sun	Market with trellis.
Oakleaf hydrangea (<i>Hydrangea quercifolia</i>)	Shrub	Rose-wine foliage	5	Shade to part shade	Attractive white flowers that fade to pink in late summer.
European cranberrybush (<i>Viburnum opulus</i>)	Shrub	Bright red fruit	3	Sun to part sun	Yellow-red to reddish-purple fall foliage.
Boston ivy (<i>Parthenocissus tricuspidata</i>)	Vine	Orange-red foliage	4	Sun to part sun	Bluish-black fruit.
Virginia creeper (<i>Parthenocissus quinquefolia</i>)	Vine	Scarlet-purple foliage	3	Sun to part sun	Bluish-black fruit.



Beautyberry is an old-fashioned favorite. The magenta-purple berries are borne in great abundance in the fall.

harmonious combinations, it will be necessary to promote whole gardens rather than individual plants. A good example of this is to sell butterfly bush with other butterfly-attracting plants. Another idea is to sell a package of woody plants along with grasses, perennials, and annuals for a set price. A sample package might include 3 spring-flowering shrubs, 3 summer-flowering shrubs, 3 groundcovers, 2 grasses, 8 perennials, and 3 flats of annuals for \$200, and this can be promoted as a "New Home Special." Most new houses have foundation plantings and a couple of trees, but the rest can be supplied by you.

- Pay attention to price points. Use the same kinds of prices that you use with your herbaceous plants. For example, if you're selling a six-pack of pansies for \$2.69, make sure your woody plants also have similar values, such as \$11.99 or \$9.69.
- Keep your plant sizes small. Leave the ball and burlapped trees and containers larger than three gallons to the nurserymen and garden centers.
- Anticipate holidays. Find woody material that will be in bloom for the major holidays (Easter, Mother's Day, Halloween), when customers will be looking for gifts.
- Plan ahead for the best selection. Establish a rapport with local nurserymen who can provide the quantity and quality that you require. Remember,

you are competing with landscapers, garden centers, and big box stores for the choice material.

- Focus on impulse buying. Place woody plants in peak bloom in areas that are highly visible to shopping customers or passing cars. Have informative signs that tell an interesting fact about the plants.

Another idea for sales: Promote woody plants that can provide cut flowers or fruit, like hydrangeas or calliycarpas. Many woody cuts are very long-lasting in a vase. Also, don't be afraid to recommend to customers that they hold a woody plant in the pot while it's in flower, then plant outside for rebloom next year.

Summary

Many grower-retailer operations are owned by people in their 30's and 40's, who began the business as a second career or as an investment opportunity. Probably, your business has expanded from a small greenhouse to provide more selection and service to your customers. Now you have created a reputation as a quality grower and you're looking for new, profitable ways to offer more variety to your loyal customers. Woody plants are a great avenue to pursue because so few greenhouse growers ever consider including shrubs, trees, vines, and groundcovers in their inventory. As floriculture crops merge with nursery crops in the retail area, both types of ornamentals will only benefit from one another. 🌿