Wake Up Your Garden

By Maureen O’Connell

A garden lives through all of our four seasons. While it responds to the Earth’s position with respect to the sun— spring, summer, autumn, winter, it offers us a kaleidoscope of pictures: the new awakenings of spring; the vibrant colors and scents of summer; the muted tones of fall’s flowers and shrubs; and the stark, skeletal frames of winter landscapes.

For years, I have always planned my active return to my gardens around St. Patrick’s Day. This might vary by a week or two, depending upon the weather. Sam, Tom, and I now have a serious purpose to our garden walks. We must assess the damage, or lack thereof, that winter has inflicted upon our garden residents. As of this date, I predict that the gardens will have sustained little long-lasting damage—so it is now time to wake up our gardens. I can think of no better way than an infusion of color from spring-flowering shrubs. Besides adding color, shrubs can perform many roles in the garden. They can create a privacy hedge, anchor a hedgerow of shrubs and perennial flowers, or define an island planting scheme. There are shrubs that bloom in one season or many. Let us now look at some that bloom in the spring; are recommended for our Planting Zone 7; are deer resistant; and are generally pest and disease free. That is a tall order, so don’t be surprised to experience some exceptions.

Nothing reminds me more of the arrival of spring than the sweet, heady fragrance of lilacs. Lilacs have been around for a long time. The variety ‘Sensation,’ introduced in 1938, has certainly stood the test of time. This shrub sets masses of purple blooms with creamy white edges. It is ideal as a specimen planting. ‘President Lincoln’ is considered the best blue common lilac. This is a reliable, fast-growing variety with long trusses of single, blue-lavender flowers. In 2009, horticulturist Tim Wood of Spring Meadow Nursery in Michigan developed a new re-blooming lilac, Bloomerang. There are other re-bloomers on the market, so what gave this variety the spotlight? Accolades such as “the most compact, heaviest-blooming dwarf lilac ever grown” and “a flower machine for four months” accompanied its introduction to the garden world. Growing to a height of four to five feet and a spread of three feet, it is excellent for small spaces or to grow as a low hedge.

Forsythia is an old-time favorite. I still remember from my childhood the large, bright yellow shrubs that lined one side of the garage. Left unpruned, which they did many a year, their arching sprays covered the garage’s windows, crept down the steps to the lower patio, and came close to taking over the lawn. The French variety ‘Show Off’ is a compact version with golden flowers that are brighter, larger, and stacked more closely together than older varieties. For a different look, combine it with its white cousin *Abeliophyllum*, White Forsythia. This shrub is the only species in this Korean genus. It belongs to the olive family, as does the common *Forsythia*. This combination of yellow and white flowers with the dark green foliage of both makes a striking display.

White Flower Farm’s catalog says that “the best antidote to winter is a planting of Witch Hazels.” Depending upon the weather, this upright, spreading shrub delivers its first big color display in late February or early March. ‘Harvest Moon’ takes a different route; it flowers after its leaves have dropped in the fall. No garden should be without a witch hazel.

About ten years ago, I bought for my husband Jim’s birthday a tree wisteria ‘Texas White.’ I have always loved the powerful scent of wisteria, but the vine variety demanded a very strong support on which to grow, be that a fence, a pergola, or the side of your house. True to the nature of any vine, it can get quite out of hand and smother anything on which it rests. Tree wisteria are pruned to take on the form of a tree; this takes quite awhile to get started and even more time to keep it from reverting back to what it wants to be: a vine. Jim’s wisteria is now quite large and old. Every summer it secretly sends out shoots underground that somehow land up in my next door rose garden, where they twist and weave over every plant in their path. I forgive Mr. Wisteria for this nasty habit because nothing can compare to his wonderful, heady fragrance that perfumes the whole of Middle Garden.

There are many more spring flowering shrubs that can make a big impact on your garden design. Visit your garden centers and/or flower catalogs as soon as the ground becomes workable. The above-mentioned shrubs usually sell out early, so hurry—it’s time to wake up your garden.