

# Planting Outside Prime Time

Learn about all of the plant materials you can offer throughout the year to ensure your customers know they can garden all year long instead of just in the spring.

By Maureen Gilmer

## Gilmer Introduces Gardening E-Books

MoPress is the electronic imprint for a national gardening authority and the host of DIY Network's "Weekend Gardening" show, Maureen "Mo" Gilmer. *Backyard Wedding Makeover* is the first title created with this new concept for E-books.

Gilmer's solution to long E-books was to create more titles with shorter lengths. Easier to digest, this approach gets the information to readers in a convenient, time-saving fashion without scrolling through voluminous text. The shorter length is quicker to download through slower-speed Internet connections as well, according to Gilmer.

To give them greater visual appeal, MoPlants Press engaged Revert Graphics to creatively design every page of the 2-column-format E-books to make graphically pleasing presentations. The application of color photography with captions as well as helpful reoccurring tip boxes and sidebars helps break up the text just as with high dollar printed gardening books.

*Backyard Wedding Makeover* can help transform a backyard to make it ready for a beautiful outdoor wedding. Contents include sections on evaluating the yard, organizing the wedding space and creatively restoring worn-out garden elements. It also contains references for annual bedding plants divided into easy-to-read color charts that help with selecting just the right plant palette for the wedding color scheme.

Gilmer is offering her new E-book free of charge. To find out more about this offer, contact Debbie Parisi at (916) 630-9139 or visit [www.moplants.com](http://www.moplants.com).



Merchandising in prime time is a no-brainer. When late spring is bright and blooming, the primal urge to plant afflicts everyone. But as the heat rises, traffic slows and so does the bottom line. Every garden center's dream is to keep the spring traffic moving more evenly throughout the year so costs and cash flow do not suffer seasonal disparity.

Certainly, we know that fall sales of pumpkins and Christmas trees can augment income, but that should be considered a bare minimum. Nature's glory is arrayed in every season, and it is easy to exploit stellar performers to extend your plant merchandising to year-round strategies.

Obviously, the notion of year-round plant sales will differ radically with regional climate. It will be more challenging in Des Moines, Iowa, to draw customers in the cold months than in Miami, Fla. Thankfully, large greenhouses can help to even the score.

No matter where your garden center is located, the key is to expand your thinking. Exploiting lesser-known, outside-prime-time bloomers into standard inventory ensures vivid displays that catch the eye and lure customers. Unfortunately, many of our customers are not knowledgeable enough to know these "outsiders," so you will have to raise their consciousness with strong information and advertising support. Overall, it's not just what you stock in the off-season, it's how you package it with information and display that drives sales.

**Above:** *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Tardiva' is a rare autumn bloomer. (Photos: Maureen Gilmer)

## Beat Late Summer Doldrums

As the frenzy of planting season fades and temperatures rise, it is a challenge to lure customers back to the garden center. The heat fatigue factor of late July and August is undeniable, and planting during high temperatures does not result in happy, healthy transplants.

**Trees and shrubs.** At this time, trees and shrubs that are late-summer bloomers are big attention getters because they can make a strong display at streetside. A showy boxed specimen such as watermelon-red crepe myrtle out front will have far more visual impact than rafts of bedding plants you must nurse through heat waves. Big bloomers may also catch the eye of male customers who may find large, woody plants more to their liking.

**Butterfly magnets.** Similarly, this season finds big, rangy butterfly bushes blooming. The greatest of all butterfly magnets, buddleia have big flowers and offer a valuable habitat customers can see as butterflies flit around the displays.

**Dwarf forms.** To give these old favorites new life, emphasize dwarfs and newer very dwarf forms. Shorter stature makes many plants a possibility for spatially challenged urban gardeners. Lure them with big, showy plants, and you'll find the smaller versions an easy sell.

**Hydrangeas.** The third member of this late-season triad is the hydrangea. The big mop head and lacecap varieties are irresistible, particularly to flower arrangers. It is far easier to sell blooming hydrangeas, and when there is a well-advertised selection to choose from, they are far more of an event than mere inventory.

**Full sized.** By late summer, hostas are also full sized, and prairie-born perennials, such as Joe Pye weed, monarda, goldenrod, river lily and all the coneflowers are at their peak. These plants look like a better value in late summer because they have reached the maximum size for their containers.

## Start Autumn Fire

Autumn is the most counter-intuitive gardening season. Customers are in back-to-school mode or settling into hibernation for indoor crafts instead of gardening. Yet autumn can be even better than spring for planting in the West. Getting this message across to the public is extremely difficult.

In arid regions where drought-resistant plants are common, they fare much better when fall planted. Therefore, the message isn't "Yes, you can garden in fall," it's, "You will find better success when you garden in fall." With the entire winter and wet spring to adapt to native soil and spread outside the nursery-container-sized rootball, the plant becomes established and drought resistant sooner in its life span. This is a truth unknown to many customers because newspapers drop their gardening stories at summer's end for more interior-oriented content. Getting the word out on

radio, local TV news segments and in papers will go far in driving customers into garden centers and back out to their own gardens.

Plant stock for autumn is divided into two groups: traditional autumn foliage plants and late-blooming flowers. Maples and burning bush virtually sell themselves in this season. But to encourage shopping for these plants in autumn depends on selling the customer on the idea that individuals within a single species may vary considerably in color intensi-



**Top:** Maiden grass cultivars of *Miscanthus sinensis* are showiest in fall flower. **Bottom:** Large, spiral junipers are upscale mid-winter moneymakers.

ties. Only when plants are purchased in full autumn spectacle can a customer be absolutely sure he or she will be satisfied in future seasons. This is even more vital in warmer climates where even the standard fall color can be highly variable in color.

**Hydrangea paniculata.** Beyond this typical fall foliage lies some really stellar plants that bloom in this odd season. The *Hydrangea paniculata* group of cultivars holds its flowers well into November depending on weather conditions. During this transitional season when little else blooms, these big, bold beauties are visible to passing traffic and present outstanding sales displays with ornamental grasses. They also offer strong story lines for advertising and media focused on pushing back winter until the last minute.

**Asters.** While chrysanthemums are the standard bedding fare for autumn, asters are also appealing and long-lived garden choices. As North American natives, their value to ecologically sensitive gardeners cannot be overstated. Many cultivars have good color range and a civilized form. This beautiful cottage-garden-style perennial deserves to be present to add freshness to this dying season.

**Ornamental grasses.** Nothing sells in the late season like ornamental grasses. They are fully flowered and nodding in the autumn winds, often silvered and curling into extravagant animated textures. Here are big bold plants that go in ground in fall and live up winter landscapes after they have gone dormant. Stocking those with the strongest stalks and best winter color allows promotions to emphasize winter decorating of the garden through wise fall planting.

## Winter Solstice Blues

This is the season of the greatest disparity in the garden center world. Warmer climates have quite active nurseries, while further north it is a virtual graveyard! But the plant realm is still fully active with specifics that work well for interior holiday décor and living gifts.

**Evergreens.** While the ground is not workable, the container market thrives. Bringing evergreens indoors allows some garden plants to become temporary interior accents. Topiaries large and small are in high demand now, particularly conical shapes and the spiral-cut junipers that make haute-living Christmas trees. The benefit of coniferous evergreens is their cold tolerance, which makes for outstanding entry accents and potted terrace displays. The naturally tinted foliage of blue spruce, golden arborvitae and exotic threadleaf junipers presents a versatile decorating palette. The best part is that come spring they become a permanent part of the outdoor garden.

**Asian flair.** The rise of Asian design has created high demand for bonsai specimens. Consider this an aesthetic choice rather than interest in

true bonsai, which we all know are exorbitantly expensive. What can be called quasi-bonsai allows a slightly larger pot, so plants are not so vulnerable to occasional dryness. Winter stock will consist mainly of coniferous evergreens, which are affordable and available. It is not unreasonable to

consider offering a make-a-quasi-bonsai class to encourage homemade bonsai as both decorations and gifts. This takes the mystery out of these uniquely pruned plants and sells a lot of small-container evergreens, rocks, decorative gravel and pricey pots during the slow season.

**Succulents.** Winter is an ideal time to stock succulents in the greenhouse. Treated as annuals, exotic echeverias and colorful aeonium are finding their way into new holiday table decorations. They are also hot stuff with the modern design crowd. These plants retain



Late-blooming perennial Russian sage and purple coneflower are fabulous in September.

their color and shape with little to no light over a long period and may become appealing window plants after the holidays. You can also promote frost-hardy alpine sedums and sempervivums for wreaths and centerpieces.

Frost-hardy succulents sell far better when not lost in the shuffle of peak-season competition from flowering bedding plants. These are doubly appealing because they allow Northern customers to move their succulents into the permanent garden after the holidays.

### The First Breath Of Spring

Invariably, those who neglected to plant spring bulbs in the fall lament the emptiness of their early gardens. Bulblets become the new annuals of very early spring in climates where the soil can be worked or in containers elsewhere.

**Hellebores.** In perennial gardens, hellebores are in rare form early on. Their muted yet exotic appeal is never greater than in the remnants of spare winter gardens. A flurry of breeding has produced far more gardenesque varieties with visually compelling flower colors well beyond the former greenish hues.

**Flowering shrubs.** This is also the season when old-fashioned, early flowering shrubs really stand out. Improved forsythia varieties produce larger blooms over more of the plant for better cut and

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## Star Performers Outside Prime Time

### VERY EARLY SPRING

Sprouted bulblets	Tulip, hyacinth
<i>Cercis canadensis</i>	Redbud
<i>Chaenomeles japonica</i> hybrids	Japanese Flowering Quince
<i>Daphne odora marginata</i>	Winter Daphne
<i>Forsythia intermedia</i>	Forsythia
<i>Hamamelis x intermedia</i> hybrids	Witch Hazel
Helleborus hybrids	Christmas/Lenten Rose

### LATE SUMMER

<i>Buddleia davidii</i>	Butterfly Bush
<i>Echinacea purpurea</i>	Purple Coneflower
Heuchera foliage	Coral Bells
Hydrangea	Hydrangea
<i>Lagerstroemia indica</i>	Crepe Myrtle

### AUTUMN

<i>Aster novi-belgii</i>	New York Aster
<i>Acer palmatum</i>	Japanese Maple
Chrysanthemum	Chrysanthemum
<i>Euonymus alatus</i>	Burning Bush
<i>Eupatorium maculatum</i>	Joe Pye Weed
<i>Hydrangea paniculata</i>	Hydrangea
Sedum 'Autumn Joy'	'Autumn Joy' Stonecrop

### WINTER

Ilex	Holly
Sedum species	Stonecrop
Sempervivum	Houseleek
Assorted Indoor Succulents	Succulents
Bonsai	Bonzai
Coniferous Evergreens	Evergreens

forcing branches. Flowering quince, forgotten by many, is a hallmark of this season, the original red expanded into an array of shades light and dark. Together, this splash of color creates dramatic displays large enough to garner attention outdoors.

**Willow.** Willows, which tend to be lost during the growing season, are at their best now. Pussywillow, coveted by decorators and flower arrangers, can be powerful sellers. In fact, it is difficult to sell willows at any other time of year.

**Flowering trees.** Finally, keep the early flowering trees front and center. Cold-hardy dogwoods offer high appeal as do flowering crabapples and redbuds. During the rest of the year, these, too, are overlooked but deserve high-profile locations in early spring.

The art of plant merchandising outside prime time requires some strategic thinking and strong, highly visual displays. In the flowerless seasons, your ability to put out big, bold bloomers will garner far more interest from passing motorists. If sufficiently inspired, gardeners will continue to plant well outside the spring window of opportunity. Most important of all is to get the word out in the media of every kind to educate the consumer that garden making is not limited to an ephemeral rite of spring. 🌱

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