

What Would You Do If You Could Choose? Some Ideas For Trees and Shrubs in 2019



By: Gary Johnson

*Urban Forestry Outreach Research and Extension (UFore)
University of Minnesota*

First things first. Trees and shrubs are not like petunias. Every year, the All-America Selections for flowers comes out and everyone rushes to get the seeds, the plugs or the cell-paks of those exciting new colors, heights, fragrances. That's great, and some pretty sharp marketing on the part of the bedding plant growers, but trees and shrubs don't work that way. New varieties or species tend to trickle out a bit slower, for a good reason: trees and shrubs take a heck of a lot longer to field-trial and evaluate before release, and then even longer to produce enough of them to be ready to stock the garden centers and nurseries.

What would you do if you could choose new trees and shrubs? Would you plant for yourself or would you think about what would be good for the next few generations? Would you go for color, either season-long or autumn color? Would you favor size, or fragrance, or shape or growth rate? Or would you just try anything that you could squeeze into your landscape simply because you like having some variety? I feel your pain. Or, would you think like an urban forester and select plants that will benefit the community without being maintenance hassles or sinks for every insect pest or disease that requires a spray schedule? The trees and shrubs in this little teaser will try to fill both perspectives and hopefully generate a little excitement to carry us through the next few months of winter.

Category One: trees and shrubs for the impatient gardener. These plants will grow fast yet are still pretty good for the landscape, will fill in those lost spaces...spaces created by storms, emerald ash borer or oak wilt...and get the landscape back to looking good in a reasonable amount of time.

1. Silver maple, yes, silver maple. But not just any silver maple. **'Silver Queen'** is out on the market now that at least one large wholesale nursery is supplying the trade. It grows fast like a silver maple, but has a much better architecture. Gone are the weakly-attached branches and multiple leaders. It won't get as big as the species, but will still grow to be an excellent shade tree with a more upright shape and topping off around 50 feet in height. Oh yes, it generally produces fewer seeds than the species, too.

2. **'Accolade'** or **'Triumph'** elm. These are Asiatic elms, but they've been around a long time and haven't caused any problems with invasiveness. These are recommended over the American elm varieties because they are not only speedy growers, but they are well-built. You won't need to put an arborist on a retainer with these elms as you would if you planted **'Valley Forge'** or **'Cathedral.'** Accolade and Triumph look pretty much the same, but Triumph has shinier leaves. Both have excellent resistance to Dutch elm disease.

3. Tulip poplar/tulip tree (*Liriodendron tulipifera*). What? Tulip poplar? Twenty-six plus years ago when I first moved to Minnesota, there were rumors of a tulip poplar growing somewhere in the metro. I never saw it, but it could have been true. Now, we're growing them quite regularly in southeast MN. The tulip poplars at our research nursery survived the screwy late winter of 2018 while we lost well-established Autumn Blaze and red maples. No one knows how big tulip poplars will get in MN since they don't have a long track record, but it would be safe to say they'll grow at least to 40-50 feet. They're straight as an arrow, eventually develop an interesting, muted tulip-like flower, and have leaves that look like tee shirts hanging on the clothes line.



Tall and straight as an arrow, a mature tulip poplar. Photo: U Conn.



Tee shirts hanging on a clothesline leaves. Photo: Montgomery Botanic Garden.

4. **Little Devil** ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius* 'Donna May'). Personally, I would have foregone the Little Devil trade name and stuck with 'Donna May,' but no one asked me. This is a really nice, medium sized (4-ish feet squared) shrub with deep burgundy foliage. Since it's a ninebark, there's not much that can bring it to its knees, and Little Devil has good resistance to powdery mildew, so it looks good month after month. Best in full sun although I've grown it in light shade and it doesn't do bad at all.

5. Smoke bush (*Cotinus coggygria*). One of the more striking shrubs for a southeastern MN garden, it's fast-growing and easy to care for. Cut it back to the ground every year or two (sometimes the rabbits take care of that for you) and it still grows upwards of 6-8 feet each summer. **'Royal Purple'** has deep purple foliage through the growing season, which looks pretty cool when mixed in with evergreens or other dark green leaved plants. A new purple-leaved variety on the market, **'Winecraft Black'** stays a bit smaller. They will grow in full sun to light shade but the sunnier the site, the fewer issues with powdery mildew.

Category Two: “I know I shouldn’t, but may I have one more?” These selections are for the discerning gardener who even though she/he knows it’s wrong, they love maples...and are in love with red, especially in the autumn. I’m not judging.

1. **Pacific Sunset** maple (*Acer truncatum x platanoides* ‘Warrenred’). This is a newer release that should do well in the southern third of Minnesota, certainly from the twin cities south. It’s a hybrid between shantung maple (one of my favorites) and Norway maple. If you’re going to plant a maple, at least plant one that has a good relationship with climate change. Pacific Sunset is much more tolerant of heat and drought than sugar and freeman maples, and has a lovely autumn foliage of oranges and yellows. Probably a 40-50 foot shade tree at maturity.

2. **‘Frontier elm’** (*Ulmus* ‘Frontier’). This should satisfy your “better red” demand for autumn color. Another tree for the southern third of Minnesota, it does have deep red autumn foliage, very small leaves, good resistance to Dutch elm disease and it stays small (25 feet or less). Also, since it’s an elm, it is site tough, ready to take on the assaults of climate change. It is an Asiatic hybrid, so it’s much easier to maintain than the American elm hybrids.

3. Black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*) should do well in the southern half of Minnesota, providing the site is okay. It is in this category because of its autumn foliage, which can range from sugar maple oranges, yellows and reds to spectacular wine red. It does very well in water-logged soils as well as more mesic sites, grows in full sun to partial shade and is another medium sized (40-50 foot) shade tree. Trust me, if you ever see this tree in its autumn glory, you’ll want to adopt one.

4. Silky dogwood (*Cornus amomum*) is a native (to southeast MN) large shrub that has a wonderful reddish-burgundy autumn foliage, blue berries with a little white to them, clusters of flat-topped white flowers in the spring, grows in sun or shade and is an excellent shrub for rain gardens and attracting pollinators and birds. Good grief, what more do you want? Why haven’t you planted more of these?

5. Winterberry holly (*Ilex verticillata*) is another site tolerant shrub native to Minnesota. It doesn’t have a red autumn foliage, but the female plants are covered with bright red berries from October through December and are spectacular. It is native to wet areas (it’s found in drainage ditches or swampy areas) but does quite well in mesic landscapes. There are so many cultivars of this plant that you can almost pick a size and there’s a cultivar that will give it to you. Very easy to maintain (cut it to the ground every 3-5 years or so) and very problem-free to boot.



‘Pacific Sunset’ maple in autumn foliage. Photo: J. Frank Schmidt

Category Three: “Get In My Belly!” These are plants for the practical gardener, the one who wants attractive plants but wants to eat them (parts of them) as well.

1. Serviceberry/Juneberry/Saskatoon/Shadblossom (*Amelanchier* species). This tree or shrub has more common names than most other plants. I kind of like Saskatoon, just because it’s fun to say. Regardless, they all have delicious fruit in mid-summer, are native to the upper Midwest, are very site tolerant (even of deicing salt spray and runoff), have lovely white flowers in the spring before the leaves emerge, and brilliant autumn foliage. The variety ‘**Autumn Brilliance**’ is...well...Brilliant! Red! A friend made serviceberry pie a few years ago and it was one of the tastiest pies I’ve ever had.

2. Black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*) is yet one more native shrub with a fantastically good-for-you fruit, beautiful white flowers in the spring and great autumn foliage (wine red). I know what you’re thinking. If the fruit is really good for you, it must taste bad. Actually, you’re kind of right. It’s tempting to eat the fruit when it looks dark blue and ripe, but if you do, your upper lip will recede into your sinuses. It’s like goji berry. Wait until there’s a frost, then eat the fruit and it’s not too bad (I’m not selling you on this fruit yet, am I?). Chokeberry has (reputedly) more antioxidants (I still don’t know what those are, but they sound important) than blueberries, so make a juice of the fruit and either add it to other fruit juices or sweeten it a bit and drink it in its finest purity.

3. ‘**Jefferson**’ filbert (*Corylus avellana*), also known as hazelnut, is a large shrub with the largest fruit of the filberts. Full sun to light shade. Resistant to filbert blight. Autumn color is primarily gold. If you try growing filberts, your biggest challenge will be out-competing the squirrels. The nuts are delicious, even when it’s not Thanksgiving or Christmas.

4. Blueberries (*Vaccinium* species) come in two versions: lowbush and highbush. Most blueberry farms have highbush blueberries. Most hikers in the back country fall in love with lowbush blueberries. Highbush blueberries have larger fruit, but some claim they are tasteless compared to lowbush blueberries. It’s kind of a Ford vs. Chevy argument (Fords are better). There are blue blueberries, pink blueberries and white blueberries; confusing. They are very high in antioxidants (there it is again), so they must be good for you. There are so many varieties suitable for Minnesota that you’ll have a hard time picking two; and you should pick two. Even though they will self-pollinate, you’ll have better fruit if you have a cross-pollinator.

5. Chestnut crabapple (*Malus* species). A lovely white-flowering crabapple that produces the most perfect, lunch box apples. Just the right size and they have kind of a nutty flavor to them. A crabapple is an apple that is 2.0 inches in diameter or less. Chestnuts are right about 2 inches, which means you don’t need to have hinged jaws to bite into one. A University of Minnesota release in 1949 (a baby-boomer apple), that is very cold hardy with high resistance to apple scab and fireblight. On a personal note, Chestnut crabapple and Frostbite are my two favorite Minnesota apples...and I eat a LOT of apples.



Chestnut crabapple. Photo:
UMN Extension