



GARDEN NOTES

A SHRUB BY ANY OTHER NAME IS A BUSH

By Dennis Hinkamp

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Is it a shrub or a bush? Some people think there is a distinct difference between the two. The distinction is usually something like “bushes are okay, but shrubs are nasty, prickly critters that collect spiders, softballs and small dogs.”

Whether you call them shrubs or bushes, these plants are important to any landscape says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Perennials and annuals provide color and variety. Trees add shade and perspective, and usually frame our homes and yards. Shrubs are the plants we relate to — they help us feel a part of the landscape because they bring it down to our level.

There are literally hundreds of different shrubs that grow in our area, Goodspeed says. A shrub or bush is a woody plant with a mature height of between one and a half and 10 feet. Anything smaller is ground cover. Anything larger is a tree. Most bushes are also easy to place in the landscape. Drought-tolerant shrubs can survive and even flourish on only the water Mother Nature provides.

“Sometimes there is a misconception of what drought tolerant means,” Goodspeed says. “People often conjure up an image of cactus and a few other tough succulents. Fortunately, many of our low-water-use shrubs are quite attractive and thrive in landscapes throughout northern Utah. Most are simply over-watered because they receive the same amount of water as everything else in the landscape. Plant this type of shrub or bush away from the others and it will survive without irrigation or with just occasional watering.”

Mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus montanus*) and smooth sumac (*Rhus glabra*) are tall shrubs that survive without any additional water once they are established, Goodspeed explains. Mountain mahogany can reach a height of 10 feet with a spread of about 6 feet. It can be pruned to keep it smaller. Smooth sumac is known for its beautiful, red fall color. It can be a bit invasive.

The standard Siberian pea shrub (*Caragana arborescens*) reaches a height of 10 feet, he adds. The dwarf form (*Caragana pygmaea*) only grows to a height of 4 or 5 feet in 20 years. The

pea shrub has a nice yellow flower and makes a great border, informal hedge or windbreak.

A few other tall shrubs also survive with no additional moisture but do best if watered deeply once or twice a month, Goodspeed says. Redtwig dogwood (*Cornus sericea* var.), forsythia (*Forsythia* spp.), Tatarian honeysuckle (*Lonicera tatarica* var.), sweet mock orange (*Philadelphus x coronarius*) and common lilac (*Syringa vulgaris*) are often planted in Utah landscapes because of their beauty, but they are all drought tolerant.

“Look around at old, abandoned homesteads where there has been no additional water for the past 20 years,” he suggests. “The lilac, honeysuckle and dogwood shrubs continue to survive and do well. These adaptable shrubs can be pruned to maintain a height of 6 to 8 feet and offer fragrant, colorful blossoms each spring and summer.”

There are also many smaller drought-tolerant shrubs that reach a mature height of less than 6 feet, Goodspeed says. These include the colorful barberry (*Barberis* spp.), flowering quince (*Chaenomeles japonica*), blue mist spirea (*Caryopteris x clandonensis*), currants (*Ribes* spp.), Oregon grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*), potentilla (*Potentilla fruticosa*) and the pink dwarf flowering almond (*Prunus glandulosa*).

“All these shrubs either have a fantastic flower or ornamental foliage,” Goodspeed says. “Barberries have purple, red, pink, and green foliage that adds a nice contrast in any landscape. The barbs can be a little intimidating or useful in the right setting. Blue mist spirea is one of the few truly blue flowering shrubs that has color from July until frost in the fall.

“Currants are known for their fruit but also have a great form and wonderful fall color. My favorite is probably the flowering almond. The double pink blossoms covering the plant in the spring are spectacular. The plant also has a nice shape and can be used as a specimen planting or incorporated into a large shrub and perennial bed.”

When purchasing bushes, consider those that are both beautiful and can survive during a drought or with restricted water conditions, he says. This leaves you one less thing to worry about when water is scarce.

For more information, contact your local [USU County Extension office](#).

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