

Spotlight on Shrubs

By Luis Llenza

If you think of shrubs as generic, green, round bushes plopped around the house and yard, perhaps it's time to rethink the topic. These versatile plants are the workhorses of the landscape. They anchor your house in its space, define yard areas, create privacy, camouflage unsightly air conditioning units, outline walkways, decorate patios, fashion barriers for sound and sun, and build multi-tiered understory canopies. Along with all these functions, and more, ornamental shrubs bring color, texture and artistry to the yard.

Green Buttonwoods and Clerodendrum quadriculare will provide shade for your lawn or home. Ilex Schilling or Indian Hawthorne (Raphiolepis indica) shrubs can serve as transition plants from lawn to walkways or between lawn and ground cover in sunny areas. Their color, size and shape allow the eye to flow smoothly from one area to the next. For the same technique in shady areas, I like Aglaonema 'Silver Queen', an aroid whose silvery leaves bring light to deep shaded areas.

Anchor the corners of your lot, fence or house with shorter shrubs, such as dwarf Schefflera, or my new favorite, Sanchezia. Its variegated leaves and small, but showy, yellow blooms are a beautiful contrast to everyday green and will create garden envy. Background shrubs that lend themselves to shaping include Ligustrum, Podocarpus, Pittosporum and Viburnum. Podocarpus or Silver Buttonwood can also serve as windbreaks.

Additional favorites for flowering shrubs are yellow Thyrsalis, Brunselfia with purple, lavender and white flowers, Queen Sirikit Mussaenda with red-outlined pink petals, and red-orange Cape Honeysuckle. For mass planting areas, use shrubby vines (Thunbergia erecta, Pandorea), herbaceous perennials (Blackberry-Lilly, Heliconias), large Bromeliads (Mexicana, Vriessa) and gigantic Aroids. The large leaves of the Giant Aroid (Alocasia macrorrhiza) create a unique look, as does the new Alocasia 'Purple Prince' with beautiful iridescent purple leaves. For a splash of color in shady areas, use Cane Begonias with pink, red and white blossoms.

Highlight an entry court with Acalypha 'Heterophylla', which displays maroon-to-pink colored leaves. Change garden texture using the Chenille Plant with its red, beard-like flower, or the Red Powderpuff with large red or reddish-pink inflorescence. For a special welcome to your home, plant a Gardenia for its pleasant fragrance, or the less temperamental Brunfelsias which has a clove aroma. Finally, shrubs can be deterrents to intruders when strategically placed. At vulnerable points of entry to the yard, consider a bed of Agaves, armed with needle-like tips, or a cycad, like Zamia, with stiff leaves that are sharply tipped. And the low-growing Crown-of Thorns (Euphorbia milii) would be painful to encounter beneath a window.