



Beat the Heat with Cool Summer Flowers

BY RICK LEWANDOWSKI | AS PUBLISHED IN THE NEWS JOURNAL July, 2011

Summer is once again presenting gardeners with the ultimate test to their will power through the oppressive heat and humidity now smothering us. This week could present some of the hottest and most challenging weather of the year for garden plants.

Despite the heat, humidity, and uncertainty of rainfall, though, are there plants that can still provide us with summer pleasure? Moreover, can we achieve our goal and, yet, avoid investing inordinate time and precious resources just to keep them alive?

These questions lie at the core of many who garden. In spring and autumn it seems easy to create charming garden settings. Indeed, there is a host of plants from which to choose. Once the heat and drought of summer arrives, though, the palette of attractive and carefree plants becomes a case of careful selection. In fact, when one looks casually on the typical summer landscape, it is hard to imagine the same excitement provided by flowers, fruit and foliage so common in spring and autumn, particularly with shrubs.

Alas! To observe is to learn that there are, in fact, shrubs we can target for their natural adaptability to summer heat and paucity of plentiful water. Furthermore, these plants produce attractive summer displays, making them perfect contributors to a summer showcase in the garden. After all, as gardeners, we are allowed to be selfish and desire the colorful spectacle of plants performing their best—especially during the long hot summer.

Below is a short list of some plants you might consider using to enhance your summer garden interest. Just remember to plan ahead so that next year you'll be enjoying the fruits of your labors with a cool glass of your favorite beverage in your hand.

If there was only one adaptable, carefree summer flowering shrub that I would recommend for the garden it is bottlebrush buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*). Its upright 12" - 18" long candle-like clusters of white "bottlebrush-like" flowers are dominant in the garden during late June through mid-July just as the summer heat is at its peak. And, if you enjoy butterflies, this shrub is quite literally a magnet for them.



If you enjoy butterflies, the bottlebrush buckeye is quite literally a magnet for them



Bottlebrush buckeye is a vigorous multi-stemmed, deciduous, upright shrub with a sturdy habit.



Buckeye in fall color.

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Bottlebrush buckeye is a vigorous multi-stemmed, deciduous, upright shrub with a sturdy habit, growing 6' - 9' tall and 10' -15' wide. Its palmately-lobed leaves are sturdy and attractive throughout the summer, becoming golden yellow in the autumn.

While the flowers of this plant are what provide a striking seasonal exclamation point in the garden, the broad value of bottlebrush buckeye is that it tolerates sun to shade, dry to seasonally moist well-drained soils, and is quite adaptable to widely variable soil pH. All in all, bottlebrush buckeye makes a nearly perfect border shrub or backdrop for the garden.

Another flowering shrub at its peak during the sultry heat of summer with a slightly smaller stature is summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*). This deciduous shrub with upright stems generally reaches 4' - 8' tall and 6' wide; however, low growing forms such as 'Hummingbird' reach only 3' - 4' tall at maturity. 'Sixteen Candles' is a compact form, though, somewhat larger, reaching 4' - 5' tall with sturdy ascending flower clusters.

This plant gets its common name from the fact that in July it produces sweetly fragrant upright spike-like clusters of flowers 3" - 6" long ranging in color from pure white to pink. As with bottlebrush buckeye, it is highly attractive to a wide range of butterflies.

While summersweet requires acidic soils to perform best it, too, tolerates a wide range of soil conditions from very moist and well-drained to dry, making it an excellent candidate for use to fill spots in the summer garden when flowers and fragrance are in short supply.

Summersweet performs best in full sun with moisture, but is quite drought tolerant in partial shade once well established. During autumn the foliage of summersweet becomes golden yellow.

This shrub makes an excellent border or foundation shrub and is also frequently used along pond or stream edges where its fibrous roots help reduce soil erosion.

Few gardeners think of azaleas when asked to highlight summer flowering plants. Needless to say, though, plumleaf azalea (*Rhododendron prunifolium*) is an under-appreciated and attractive summer flowering shrub.

Plumleaf azalea is an upright to spreading deciduous multi-stemmed shrub reaching 5' - 9' tall and 5' wide. In July, it produces clusters of bright orange-red funnel-shaped flowers above its lustrous green summer foliage. The striking contrast of flowers against the foliage backdrop makes plumleaf azalea a highly prized specimen plant for the garden.



Summer sweet gets its common name from the fact that in July it produces sweetly fragrant upright spike-like clusters of flowers 3" - 6" long ranging in color from pure white to pink.



Sixteen Candles summer sweet is a compact form with sturdy ascending flower clusters.



Plumleaf azalea a blazed in color during the heat of the summer.

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While plumleaf azalea is quite drought and heat tolerant, it needs partial shade to shade and acidic soil to perform best. There is no doubt, though, that plumleaf azalea can bring a brilliant accent to the summer garden.

Dry shady conditions are frequently difficult circumstances under which to grow plants. These conditions are even more challenging for summer-flowering plants. However, Southern bush honeysuckle (*Diervilla sessilifolia*) is the exception.

This rhizomatous upright thicket-forming deciduous ground-cover shrub meets the challenge and makes an excellent plant for partial shade in average to dry settings. At maturity, Southern bush honeysuckle can grow 3' - 5' tall and 5' - 8' wide depending upon soil conditions.

Once established, it spreads to form masses, producing attractive glossy green foliage borne on strongly arching-ascending stems. In July, the terminal ends of each branch produce dense clusters of sulphur yellow star-shaped tubular flowers. These flowers brighten shady conditions and add a delightful surprise to the summer garden.

Southern bush honeysuckle is best used in the shrub border for massing or in the naturalistic garden to fill gaps. Its adaptability to a range of soil pH and moisture conditions, makes Southern bush honeysuckle an excellent carefree groundcover. Additionally, it flowers best when cut back to the ground during winter to rejuvenate new stems.

Before giving up on summer color in your shrub border please check out some of the beautiful native plants above. They will not only bring joy to your garden, but reduce the need to water your garden during summer if they are sited properly.

Happy gardening!



The plumleaf azalea will bring a brilliant accent to the summer garden.



The bush honeysuckle can handle dry shady conditions.



About the Author

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Rick has been the director at Mt. Cuba Center for 11 years and was formerly the director of horticulture at the Morris Arboretum of the University of Pennsylvania for seven years. Rick has published numerous articles about gardening and horticulture.