

True to form

New shrub offerings won't outgrow smaller home lots, postage-stamp front yards



Spring Meadow's Anna's Magic Ball® Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Anna van Vloten' PP25868 Can5284) keeps its rounded shape and diminutive size without pruning. PHOTO COURTESY SPRING MEADOW NURSERY

BY EMILY LINDBLOM

LANDSCAPE DESIGNERS FACE the challenges of smaller lot sizes and density of homes when choosing front-yard shrubs. Growers and nurseries are meeting these challenges with more shrub options that stay true to size and will not outgrow the spots where they are planted.

“I am more about plants growing in place for years to come, than I am about ripping them out because they got too big and putting in something new,” said long-time residential designer Kip Nordstrom, owner of Kip Nordstrom Design in Lake Oswego, Oregon. “I feel it is my job as designer to pick plants for spaces that meet size, light requirements, soil conditions, and longevity.”

What to look for

Georgia Clay, plant selections manager at multistate grower **Monrovia Nursery** (based in California with other farms in Oregon, Georgia and Connecticut), collaborates with breeders in new plant ➤



One hydrangea that has been sized down to fit smaller landscapes more creatively is Tiny Quick Fire® Panicle Hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* 'SMHPLQF' PP25136) grows 18 inches to 3 feet high and 2–3 feet wide. PHOTO COURTESY SPRING MEADOW NURSERY

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trials and helps make decisions about which new plants ultimately make it to a garden center. When helping select front-yard shrubs to bring to market, she looks for ones that will stay compact and will branch well without much input from the gardener themselves.

She also considers whether or not they will have multiple seasons of interest, drought tolerance, disease resistance, and ease of maintenance.

“We look for bright, bold colors with interesting, unique forms and flowers,” Clay said. “We’re seeing a demand for dark foliage or variegated foliage.”

Nicholas Staddon, company spokesperson at **Everde Growers** (based in Texas with other farms in Oregon, Florida and California), works extensively with landscape architects, designers and contractors on meeting their plant needs.

He said compact shrubs started to become more popular as the Baby Boomer

generation began retiring and doing more gardening. Compact shrubs offer an opportunity to garden with less maintenance and offer a beautiful first impression of a house.

“Front areas of the house are absolutely crucial,” Staddon said. “History shows if you’re renovating a house for sale, you’ll get a higher rate of return on dollars spent on the garden than a bathroom or kitchen.”

A tasty compact option

New compact forms of blueberries are a good choice for front yard gardens, plus they provide a tasty summertime treat.

Blueberries from the Bushel and Berry® collection are a top choice for Staddon.

“There are numerous varieties that are evergreen year round, they’re easy to maintain, self pollinating and fruiting,” Staddon said. “There are beautiful colored leaves on smaller varieties and small com-



BerryBux® looks like a boxwood, but has the bonus of blueberries. Its boxwood-like foliage and compact habit make it perfect for planting as a hedge or in groups in the garden. PHOTO COURTESY BUSHEL AND BERRY®

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Angel's Blush® Abelia (*Abelia × grandiflora* 'ABL-PII' PPAF) grows 2 feet tall by 3 feet wide and has small green and white variegated leaves that take on a rose-pink hue in cold weather and its white summer blooms are loved by hummingbirds. PHOTO COURTESY MONROVIA

pact berries that are terrific for birds.”

A few compact blueberry varieties from the Bushel and Berry® collection are the BerryBux® (*Vaccinium* 'BerryBux' PP25467) that resembles a boxwood and grows 2–3 feet high and the Jelly Bean® (*Vaccinium corymbosum* 'ZF06-179' PP24662) at only 1–2 feet high with a mounded shape, sweet berries and leaves that become amber in the autumn.

Staddon said the Peach Sorbet® (*V. c.* 'ZF06-043' PP23325) is an absolute winner, requiring only 300 chill hours and growing to 18 inches to 2 feet high in a mounded shape with green, orange and pink colored foliage.

Clay said Monrovia's Bountiful Blue® (*Vaccinium corymbosum* 'FLX-2' PP19381) collection of blueberries does well at staying compact to 3 by 3 feet with beautiful foliage and berries.

“Bountiful Blue® has one of the blu-

est berries you can get so there's quite a lot of ornamental value,” Clay said. “We partnered with breeders and Monrovia introduced them exclusively.”

Clay said there's a compact female holly variety, LittleOne® Blue Holly (*Ilex × meserveae* 'MonWilde' PPAF) that's 3–4 feet tall and wide.

“That is a really unique size for a holly that will produce berries in the winter,” Clay said. “It has beautiful foliage all year round and nice berries in the winter so it's a great option for the front yard.” It was found in Ohio so it's zone 5 hardy.

Punch of color and texture

Newly developed cultivars of long-time favorites offer compact options that provide color and texture.

Heavenly bamboo 'Nana' (*Nandina domestica* 'Atropurpurea Nana') grows slowly to 2–3 feet, as does the *N. d.* ➤

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Monrovia's Summerlasting™ Crape Myrtles (*Lagerstroemia indica*) are bred to be compact shrubs without any pruning and come in three varieties: Strawberry (L.i. 'HOCH266' PP34124), Raspberry (L.i. 'HOCH631' PP33208), and Plum (L.i. '1605' PPAF). PHOTO COURTESY MONROVIA

'Fire Power', which Nordstrom said is useful for color in a front garden for size. She said the Cavatine Pieris (*Pieris japonica* 'Cavatine') is also a slow grower that gets to 2 by 2 feet in 10 years and works well to plant under a window because it won't be blocked over time.

Staddon recommended Japanese laurel varieties like Gold Dust (*Aucuba japonica* 'Gold Dust') and Mr. Goldstrike (*A. j.* 'Mr. Goldstrike') with their emerald green and gold variegation.

Angel's Blush® abelia (*Abelia* × *grandiflora* 'ABL-PII' PPAF) is one of Clay's favorite shrubs and it grows two 2 tall by 3 feet wide. It has small green and white variegated leaves that take on a rose-pink hue in cold weather and its white summer blooms are loved by hummingbirds.

"A lot of abelias on the market send off wild shoots, whereas Angel's Blush® stays tight so it is nicer for a gardener to keep up with, without a lot of pruning," Clay said. "In the cooler months there's a pink cast over it and it looks nice and holds its variegation without reverting." She added the Angel's Blush® holds its foli-

age longer in the winter than most Abelias.

A new introduction from Monrovia in 2024 is the Golden Child™ Arborvitae (*Thuja occidentalis* 'Mirjam' PP20127) with a hardiness zone 4 and no maintenance required to grow into a 2 by 2 foot rounded ball of golden foliage.

"What we love is its amazing sun tolerance," Clay said. "A lot of *Thuja* will burn in full sun and heat and Golden Child™ has been amazing in those scenarios."

Smaller versions of larger shrubs

Newer cultivars of popular ornamental shrubs provide smaller shapes and rounded forms.

Natalie Carmolli is the media and public relations specialist at **Spring Meadow Nursery** in Grand Haven, Michigan, the grower of the Proven Winners ColorChoice brand for ornamental shrubs. She said her company grows hundreds of varieties of shrubs that stay true to size.

Spring Meadow's varieties include Anna's Magic Ball® Arborvitae (*T. o.* 'Anna van Vloten' PP25868 Can5284)

and Tater Tot® Arborvitae (*T. o.* 'SMNTOBAB' PP30761 Can PBRAF), both of which have hardiness zones three through eight and grow 2–3 feet high and three to four feet wide.

"These two rounded arborvitae keep their shape without pruning, stay on the smaller side, and offer distinctly different foliage colors," Carmolli said.

One of Nordstrom's favorite plants in a landscape is false cypress (*Chamaecyparis*), especially Soft Serve® (*C. pisifera*), which makes a fluffy statement and can be easily maintained to hold its size and shape. Koster's Hinoko false cypress (*Chamaecyparis obtusa* 'Kosteri') is slow growing to reach 4–5 feet by 3–4 feet and can be pruned as an evergreen focal point.

Pollinator-friendly options

There's also a cultural shift from front yards with grass toward front gardens with fruiting shrubs and other perennials that are more beneficial for pollinators, Staddon said.

He recommended fragrant ever- ➤

green shrubs such as *Daphne* that can make an impact year-round without taking up too much space in a front yard.

Blue Mist Spirea (*Caryopteris × clandonensis*) is another of Staddon's favorites, growing about 2–3 feet high and wide.

"It's rounded, compact and during the summer months it has a dazzling display of sky blue flowers and it's a magnet for bumblebees and other pollinators," Staddon said.

Spring Meadow's Landscape Shrub of the Year is Fizzy Mizzy® Sweetspire (*Itea virginica* 'SMNIVMM' PP33549, Can PBRAF), a native species with bright white flowers that stays at about 3 feet.

"It's zone five to nine in full sun to shade, so it's super adaptable and in different areas and very rounded," Carmolli said. "One thing that makes it different is that its flower spikes stick straight up on the plant like exclamation points. >>



Japanese laural variety Mr. Goldstrike (*A. j.* 'Mr. Goldstrike') is compact with emerald green and gold variegation. PHOTO COURTESY MONROVIA

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Pollinators love it and it's very adaptable," Carmolli said.

Staddon said another excellent choice is a new variety of bottlebrush called Light Show® Red Bottlebrush (*Callistemon Viminalis* 'LJ23' PP27547) that grows 3–4 feet, has a long blooming season with fire engine red flowers, and is drought tolerant.

Other options include the 'Soft Caress' Mahonia (*Mahonia eurybracteata* 'Soft Caress'), an evergreen that only grows to 3–4 feet with rich green leaves, and Flower Carpet® Amber Rose (*Rosa* × 'NOA97400A' PP17098), a groundcover rose that grows 2–3 feet high and about 30 inches across.

Monrovia's Summerlasting™ Crape Myrtles (*Lagerstroemia indica*) are also bred to be compact flowering shrubs at 3 by 3 feet without any input from the gardener and come in various colors. These are known for their early blooms and repeat blooms over the summer season, as well as their disease resistance.

Dwarf hydrangeas

"Hydrangeas are always a good choice for showy front yard placement and dwarf hydrangeas stay neat and tidy for front of the bed placement," Carmolli said.

Invincibelle Wee White Smooth Hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens* 'NCHA5' PP30296) is only 1 foot to 2½ feet high and wide.

"Its flowers have a light blush of pink and white and its leaves are a nice jade green color," Carmolli said. "It's small and easy to grow."

Tiny Quick Fire® Panicle Hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata* 'SMHPLQF' PP25136) grows 18 inches to 3 feet high and 2–3 feet wide, and Fire Light Tidbit® Panicle Hydrangea (*H. p* 'SMNHPK' PP32512) is 2–3 feet high and three feet wide. She said these hydrangeas are traditionally plants that people know and love but are sized down to fit smaller landscapes more creatively.

Landscape designers can "put them in a container or border or tuck them into an already established garden," Carmolli said. Tiny Quick Fire® blooms earlier than other hydrangeas and transitions its color sooner from white to pink as the season progresses. Fire Light Tidbit® is known for its deep red color once it reaches the end of the summer.

"These three hydrangeas set their buds exclusively on new wood, so they are super easy to grow and maintain," Carmolli said.

With the many varieties of compact shrubs that growers are producing, nurseries are able to meet the demand from landscape designers and homeowners for smaller, compact shrubs to fit in a front yard. ☺

Emily Lindblom is an Oregon-based freelance journalist covering business, environmental and agricultural news. She has a background in community reporting and a master's degree in multimedia journalism. Visit her website at EmilyLindblom.com or reach her at Emily@EmilyLindblom.com.

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