

# Emphasizing fall planting for color



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*Acer palmatum* 'Bloodgood' has early spring growth that is red and matures to purple. But in the fall, the entire tree is a blaze of bright red. PHOTO BY MIKE DARCY

**W**alking through my neighborhood this fall has given me pause to stop, look and marvel at the superb fall colors on many of our trees and shrubs. Driving in other neighborhoods gives me the same sensation. The fall color season is glorious.

Perhaps I think it is this way every year, but this season seems especially outstanding, and I fail to see how anyone cannot marvel at what nature has provided us. The question that I have is, how does a garden center capture this kaleidoscope of colors that many trees and shrubs have and turn it into potential sales?

Visiting a private garden in the late fall some years ago, I saw my first *Euonymus europaeus* 'Aldenhamensis'.

Here was a deciduous tree with no leaves, and yet the branches were covered with clusters of pink berries that opened to reveal a bright orange seed capsule. Against the blue sky on a clear winter day, it was stunning. Why have I never seen this plant for sale?


A visit to a garden center gave me the answer. The salesperson agreed with me that the clusters of fruits were indeed magnificent. However, the salesperson continued, “When we have most of our customers in the spring and early summer, the tree is very ordinary looking, and the clusters of white flowers are not particularly attractive. Basically, in the spring, the tree would not attract attention. In the fall, when the tree reveals its glorious

colored fruit, customers are few, and the tree is not well known nor often planted in local gardens.”

## ‘Fall is for planting’

“Fall is for planting” is a phrase that we’ve often heard over the years. Upon first hearing it, I thought to myself that it was a very good idea to promote fall planting. As a slogan, it is very truthful because fall is an excellent time to plant many trees and shrubs. With the summer heat dissipating and cooler days arriving, there is less chance of transplant shock when compared to summer planting. Fall rains have probably arrived and the soil is moist and yet still warm. It can be almost a perfect environment for new trees and shrubs.

Regardless of the slogan, the spring season still reigns supreme as the major time to plant for gardeners and garden centers. A warm, sunny spring day will bring throngs of customers to garden centers. Fall color, whether from leaves, fruits, or berries is probably not what most of these spring garden customers are thinking about. The challenge is not to diminish spring sales, but to at least “plant the seed” about planting for fall color.

Perhaps a special section with signage, TREES FOR FALL COLOR, might at least intrigue customers to look at what is available. To compliment this section, there would need to be photos showing the color to expect in the fall. Plant tags can be another way to introduce customers into thinking of fall color. Usually, the most colorful plant tags will have a photo of what the flower looks like but rarely is fall color mentioned. 

## What I'm hearing

Think about a peony and the tag that is probably attached. It will be a photo of the flower, but no mention of any other attributes of the plant. Yet, peonies can provide some wonderful color in the fall with not only with their foliage but if the flowers are left on, a seed pod will develop and when it splits open, there are often bright red seeds that are wonderful for an indoor arrangement.

Another example is *Acer palmatum* 'Bloodgood.' This is an easy one to give an example of because the early spring growth is red leaves that mature to purple. In the fall, the entire tree is a blaze of bright red. Do customers know that in the fall, the 'Bloodgood' maple has spectacular color? We have a 'Bloodgood' maple in a pot in front of our house and it amazes me how many walkers stop and ask what kind of a tree it is.

If, in fact, a garden center is going

to try some of these suggestions, in the TREES FOR FALL COLOR section, a special display of smaller trees, perhaps those that grow less than 20 feet should be added. With many homes being built on smaller lots, customers may be hesitant to purchase what they think might become a large tree. It would be a good idea to also incorporate larger type shrubs for additional choices. Having good picture tags with not only the plant as it looks in the summer, but also the fall or winter color, could result in additional sales.

It is not an easy task to get this idea of showcasing plants for fall color because it is just not the time many customers are visiting garden centers especially looking for trees and shrubs. With some effort, it can be done.

The attraction might start off slowly, but when the fall season arrives, it presents a perfect opportunity to capitalize on the



*Euonymus europaeus* 'Aldenhamensis' is a deciduous tree and in the winter, it drops its leaves and the branches are covered with clusters of pink berries that open to reveal a bright orange seed capsule. PHOTO BY MIKE DARCY

idea of planting for fall color. This marketing approach could even utilize the upcoming holiday sales to increase the attraction and nurture the seed of planting for fall color. It could become a brand-new category to market at garden centers. ©



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