

OUT ON A LIMB

‘Cultivars, Cultivars Everywhere’

By: Roger Davis, Landscape Architect

When I first went into private practice, there weren't many cultivars of specific plants to choose from. You could get a white or pink flowering eastern dogwood and that was about it. Now, there are many different types of whites, pinks or even red flowering dogwoods.

Why are there so many cultivars on today's market? **MARKETING!** A better mouse trap always sells. Propagation programs are concentrating on the improvement of the color of a flower, changing the time of year it blooms, developing a different leaf color or stem color, improving the fall foliage color, developing a dwarf or a columnar form of a much larger plant, improving cultural aspects such as more cold or heat tolerance or the ability to tolerate moist or dry conditions or withstand more light or more shade. There are breeding programs to develop only male plants that don't fruit such as the Ginkgo. In case you didn't know, the fruit of a Ginkgo makes you wonder 'where is the dog poop'. Today there are many Ginkgo cultivars such as 'Golden Globe', 'Autumn Gold' or 'Princeton Sentry' which are of different forms and shapes while still being male cultivars. If you ever see a Ginkgo cultivar it will be a male 100% of the time.

Sometimes it takes years to find out that a plant is not working out. Bradford Pear is one such plant. The tree is fast growing, early flowering, and producing beautiful fall orange and red leaves and is tolerant of poor soil conditions. What's not to like? To me, the flowers have a rank smell and through the years they have been grossly overused. The Bradford Pear is grafted on common Callery pear root stock. The Bradford grows to a much larger tree with its close nit branches making the common pear root stock unstable. Because the tree is fast growing and poorly branched it causes the wood to be weak and in later years we see limbs splitting and trees actually falling over. You would be lucky to get 20 years out of it. After 20 years of growth developing a shade tree why would you want to cut it down, grind the stump and start over? If you just have to have a pear, the 'Cleveland Select' cultivar is a much better choice. The Drift and Knockout roses, when developed were the greatest thing since sliced bread and we used a ton of them. Now they are dying ever where with a disease called the 'Rose Rosette' virus. When a plant is infected, there is no cure. It took years for this to raise its ugly head.

We have seen many changes in loropetalum. It used to be that you could have it in any leaf color as long as it was green and any flower color as long as it was white. Now we have a plethora of cultivars with burgundy leaves, fascia flowers and we also have dwarfs that only grow a few feet in height to plants that grow 15 or 20'. There is an old plant that is called Disylum racemosum or Isu Tree. It is evergreen, grows to about 10' or more in height with a wild open growth habit. In our area its insignificant flowers are borne in late winter. I never used this plant until the cultivars came on the market. 'Cinnamon Girl' grows to 2-3', 'Vintage Jade' 3-4', 'Emerald Heights' 5' and 'Linebacker' 8-10'. These plants are drought resistant, moisture tolerant, grows in the sun or shade and the flowers are still insignificant. These are great cultivars.

Look at what has happened to hydrangeas. Now there are cultivars that not only bloom on the old wood but they also bloom on the new. There are more flowers and you don't have to worry so much about when to prune. Most every plantsman has heard of 'Endless Summer' Hydrangea, due to the promotion of 'Southern Living' magazine, which blooms on the old and new wood. This trait is referred to as remontant.

How about the Encore Azaleas. Who ever thought that any azalea could bloom in the spring and again in November and December. Encore's flower color comes in white, coral, red, pink, purple and I'll bet there is a yellow flowering one in the works.

I try to stay current every year with the new cultivars entering the market and make notes as to why this one is better than its brother or the parent plan. It really boggles the mind. It is however very exciting to see the cultural improvements being made over the last 10 to 15 years. There are many more plant cultivars I could tell you about but then this wouldn't be a blog, it would be a book.

I've had clients tell me that they are getting ready to execute a plan I did for them 20 years ago. Then I tell them 'Would you go into your closet and put on a 20 year old suit'? I know, some of you would. I couldn't, it wouldn't fit.