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With less than four weeks until the New Year, it is never too early for a “best of” list for the year. So this week, let us take a look at the absolute favorite top woody plants for this plant lover the past year. It is a good start for your own personal arboretum, either in your yard or to follow at your favorite public park or garden. So, in no particular order:

Oaks (*Quercus*). Mighty, mighty oaks. They house us, wildlife counts on the acorns, their massive canopies provide major ecological services (check out [treebenefits.com](http://treebenefits.com)), and they come in many diverse leaf shapes, tree forms and branching structures, and exotic variations of their acorn fruits. Oaks, if you are watching, also provide many fine details: but just one here. Remember, next Spring, to check out emerging foliage of red oaks. You will discover such beauty to last you the entire year.

Beautybush (*Kolkwitzia amabilis*). Speaking of beauty, this is an “old-fashioned” shrub in that it was once popular but faded over the years with its somewhat gangly habit and the fact that it is not dwarf or semi-dwarf, as many designers these days respond to customers desire for something more compact. It is hard to argue with this, but I will anyway, because the glorious flowers of this plant trump design considerations. I always enjoy a beautybush at Secrest Arboretum near the eastern woods-edge, but really saw its glory on a Fourth of July apres-parade walk along the Lake Michigan community of Leland. Ask for it, push for it a little, and see if the several weeks of flowers each year are not worth planting a beautybush at the edge of your naturalized landscape.

Hickories (*Carya*). Yes, this is not a common landscape plant, but a shagbark or shellbark hickory truly adds a wonderful architectural feature when the new leaves and flowers emerge each Spring. Check them out in their natural habitat in the drier woodlands of the Summit County Metro Parks where oak hickory forests occur. I enjoy them each year at Silver Creek Park – and in our backyard. A bit of a messy tree, but worth it for those Springtime features of graceful unfurling, and especially in the case of shagbark hickory, for the multi-season bark appeal of those long planar strips of outer bark.

Arborvitae (*Thuja*). Their name literally means “tree of life” and arborvitae are evergreens that provide a fresh greening year-round for landscapes, either as large specimen trees, or with many of the horticultural cultivars, as landscape hedges. Avoid planting near the house where their backsides thin out due to lack of sun and also avoid heavy clay soils with poor internal drainage (little air pore spaces between the tiny clay particles). Arborvitae can tolerate wet sites if there is plenty of organic matter, such as in bogs and fens, but in those heavy low-oxygen clays root-rotting fungi become a problem.

Magnolias (*Magnolia*). Finally, let us end our musings and set our end-of-winter sights on magnolias. The early star and saucer magnolias and many hybrids, the later yellow magnolias and the ‘Little Girl’ series of hybrids, and the sweetbay magnolias of summer. There is nothing quite like magnolias, from lovely floral aromas to the almost prehistorically gaudy yet often delicate blossoms. Snow and cream whites, impossibly soft pinks and lurid purple-pinks, fuchsia and cream-curdled-into butter yellow. Delightful. And a picture I treasure: of Secrest Arboretum magnolias in the background with the gracious yet salt-of-the-earth retiring Arboretum curator Kenny

Cochran, the incoming Secrest Arboretum curator Joey Cochran, and me as a hanger-on. Good company, and I do not just mean the magnolias.

So, here are the first final five for 2014, five more by year's-end. If you cannot wait for the rest of the story-come join us at the Kalahari Resort in Sandusky at the OSU Green Industry Short Course next week (December 9-11). Among over 125 talks, there will be one on "TREEmendous Trees" by myself and Tim Malinich of OSU-Erie County. Check it all out at [www.osushortcourse.com](http://www.osushortcourse.com). While you are there, you can even partake in our Woody Plant Identification quiz, for as Ava Chin notes in her charming book *Eating Wildly*:

*"To really know something, whether it was a plant or a love one, was to see it in all of its stages – from seed to sprout to summertime flowering, and then on to autumn and eventually winter maturity."*

While you are at it, planning all of your pre-holiday activities: join us all for treats and talk with Kenny Cochran at his retirement celebration on December 17 at the Shisler Center Ballroom at the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center in Wooster from 3-5pm.