

Plant Lover's Almanac

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Last weekend my daughter Sara was married at OSU's Sequest Arboretum in Wooster. In addition to the perfect weather, the range of fresh greenery and the hues and shapes and aromas of a multitude of flowering trees and shrubs was a wildly natural extravagance. Her beau Tim's father, Roger Gordon was a floral designer extraordinaire in a former career, and he still has quite the touch with May flowers. Rhododendrons, and fringetrees, and even giant alliums, oh my!

In honor of May and early June flowers let's take a look at a few flowering plants for your landscape.

Kousa dogwood (*Cornus kousa* var. *chinensis*). Kousa dogwoods are in full bloom downstate right now, and in a delightfully delicate early stage now in northeast Ohio. Kousas are small (15-20 feet) trees with showy white flower bracts, appealing multi-colored bark of grays, browns and tans, stratified horizontal branching pattern, attractive dark-green leaves (red-purple fall color), and colorful, roundish raspberry-like fruits. Vase-shaped plants grow rounded with age. Kousas prefers moist soils, but are better adapted to drought than our native flowering dogwood, *Cornus florida*. It flowers three weeks later than *Cornus florida* and has blossoms elevated above the foliage by short flower stalks.

There are many cultivars with white and pink flower forms, variegated foliage, and other features. 'Satomi' is one popular cultivar with pink floral effects. 'Milky Way' has an abundance of flowers and fruits. Rutgers hybrids are crosses of *C. kousa* and *C. florida* with intermediate characteristics and improved disease resistance over some *C. florida* cultivars. Examples are 'Constellation' and 'Stellar Pink' with exceptional flowering.

White fringetree (*Chionanthus virginicus*). I shall never forget my first spring as an OSU-Summit County Extension Agent, when local farmer and friend John Graf called (no cell phones in the 1980s) and wondered what the sweetly aromatic tree at the edge of the Graf's muck crops field in Copley could be; my identification went a long way toward John believing I knew at least something about plants. It is truly spectacular.

White fringetree is a small native tree (12-18 feet) with outstanding fleecy white flowers. It has an open tree form, lustrous green leaves, and attractive blue, egg-shaped fruits on female plants. The lacy white flowers are delicate eye-openers in overall effect and are very fragrant. It is often cited as perfuming a garden from a quarter mile or more away- we smelled John's example from at least that distance. Plant males with females for fruit effect.

Fringetrees have good air pollution tolerance and pH adaptability. Chinese fringetree (*Chionanthus retusus*) is also becoming more popular and has airy white flowers, though not quite as fring-ey or fleecy. Fringetrees are closely related to ash trees and we have found some emerald ash borer infestations of native white fringetrees in southern Ohio, but the verdict is still out on whether the emerald menace will be a significant threat to white fringetrees. The Asian fringetree, which grew up around emerald ash borer, is probably less susceptible.

Rhododendrons and azaleas (*Rhododendron* spp.). Many rhododendrons and azaleas (both are in the genus *Rhododendron* with many different species) have reached their peak now for another year in northeast Ohio. This genus of plants sports a wide range of flower colors and puts on quite a show, including at OSU's Sequest Arboretum in Wooster, and at many other locations.

Northeast Ohio has more successful rhododendron plantings than southwest Ohio for a simple reason – the greater occurrence in the northeast of acid soils. Rhododendrons thrive in organic acid soils with plenty of moisture but excellent drainage, which is not something you see everywhere. Also site rhododendrons where there is protection from strong winds. So enjoy some of the almost innumerable types, for example the *Rhododendron catawbiense* cultivars such as ‘Cunningham’s White’, ‘English Roseum’, ‘Grandiflorum’, ‘Lee’s Dark Purple’ with its dark purple flowers in bud and blossom, ‘Nova Zembla’, and ‘Rosy Elegans’ with its consistent production of rosy purple flowers.

So, come out and see and smell the flowers. Summer has its pleasures, but in spring blooms rule, which brings us to one more example, now in attractive leaf, with blooms arriving in two weeks, just before the Summer Equinox.

Bottlebrush buckeye (*Aesculus parviflora*) This is not our state tree or our state shrub, but it certainly is one beautiful buckeye. It has creamy white 4-petaled flowers with red stamens in lovely panicles, and layered tiers of branches with 5-7 leaflet palmate leaves. As Michael Dirr quotes W.J. Bean in Dirr’s *Manual of Woody Landscape Plants*: “No better plant could be recommended as a lawn shrub”. As Dirr adds, it is a great plant even without the June flowers, but enjoy the blooms during their coming mid-June season in full for northeast Ohio.