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COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: Sourwood, goldenrod, oakleaf hydrangea among top native plants for Georgia

Campbell Vaughn Columnist

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Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

Sourwood trees offer year-round interest with their flowers, fall foliage, and attractive bark.

Oakleaf hydrangeas are excellent shade-loving shrubs with large, showy flower clusters and colorful fall foliage.

Goldenrod is a late-blooming perennial that provides a valuable food source for pollinators and a splash of color in the fall garden.

I am a plant person. My favorite plants are landscape ornamentals and specifically natives.

When we talk about natives, it means a plant that would grow in our region of Georgia and South Carolina if humans had not come in and disturbed the land.

The plants that God put on earth naturally are here for a reason. They grow well with our heat and cold, annual rainfall, and soil types as well as have a symbiotic relationship with other plants and animals that have adapted to the area.

I like to find plants with more than a couple of unique characteristics. Fall color adds an expanded season for color in some trees, shrubs and perennials.

Blooming is nice, but how does the flower hold up after it loses its color and dries? When a deciduous plant drops its leaves in the fall, what is the bark like?

Since we get to look at a naked plant for up to four months, it would be nice to

have something aesthetically pleasing for this wintertime nudist flora. Colorful or exfoliating bark is a good trait when there are no leaves present.

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Sourwood (*Oxydendrum arboretum*) is truly a tree for all seasons. It is one of our most beautiful natives and is ideal as a small specimen tree. It is considered a small- to medium-sized tree, maturing to about 30 feet high with a 20-foot spread.

Grown in the open, sourwood generally has a pyramid shape. Naturally, sourwood can be irregular in its form. A sourwood has lovely flowers that open in mid-summer and attract bees, hummingbirds and other pollinators.

Ever heard of sourwood honey? Well, honeybees love to use this plant as its source for a very distinctive flavor of honey. Birds like warblers love the seed the tree produces.

If you can learn to identify sourwood, you can see it along the roadways heading to the mountains north of us. When spotting the patches of sourwoods in the woods on your ride, you can then see the distinctive flowers and bright fall color that really make this tree special.

Campbell Vaughn: [Winter landscapes offer unique beauty beyond colorful flowers](#)

This native tree offers some of the best red fall colors among trees in the South. Fall color ranges from red to purple to yellow, and all three colors are often on the same tree.

Sourwood is an exceptional tree for slightly acidic (pH 5.5-6.5), well-drained soils. It can be grown in full sun or partial shade although flowering and fall color are best in full sun. The tree does reasonably well in dry, neutral soils. This tree will not tolerate dry, compacted soils and is sensitive to root disturbance, so it is not ideal for high traffic urban areas. Sourwood has no serious pest problems.

My all-time favorite plant is Oakleaf Hydrangea. If you need a shrub that can shine in the shade, oakleaf hydrangea could be just what you're looking for.

Oakleaf hydrangea is a coarse-textured native deciduous shrub that works well as a planting under larger trees like oaks. It is also great to hide in a corner on the north or east side of your house. Each summer, oakleaf hydrangea puts up huge cone-shaped clusters of white flowers that will stay on the plant for months, eventually changing to a light pink or purple.

The broad, dark green leaves are oak-shaped, giving the plant its name. They make an attractive backdrop for other plants. The leaves are largest on plants grown in the shade, reaching up to 12 inches long and almost as wide. They turn red, bronze or purple in the fall and may stay on the plant well into winter, though ultimately the plant will drop their leaves.

Even when its stems are bare, oakleaf hydrangea still adds interest to the landscape thanks to the interesting bark that peels back along its stems. These large shrubs can reach 6 to 10 feet tall and have an even wider spread. Dwarf forms are also available.

Known scientifically as *Hydrangea quercifolia*, oakleaf hydrangea is suited to USDA Plant Hardiness Zones 5-9a. Oakleaf hydrangea performs best if planted in fertile, well-drained soil, but it will also tolerate other conditions.

Pick a spot that has partial to almost full shade. In some climates oakleaf hydrangea can be grown in full sun, but in our hot area I would choose a spot with some shade. The plant can be somewhat sprawling and is known to send up new shoots, so be sure to leave it plenty of room to grow.

If you have limited space, try one of the more compact cultivars like 'Pee Wee'. Or as my friend Carol does, plant three different varieties in one massing and get a variety of similar flowers from the same type of plant. It is quite a showstopper in the early summer.

Solidago, or goldenrod, is a fantastic herbaceous late-flowering perennial. Not to be confused with ragweed, goldenrod may grow up to 6 feet tall at maturity, blooming August through October.

After dying to the ground with a freeze, red leaves sprout in late February and early March and soon become dark green. From late August to early October, its bright yellow flowers provide an attractive contrast to its lush, thick, green vegetation.

Bees and butterflies flock to the yellow blooms. The flowers are also an important food source for fall migrating monarch butterflies. It has some tolerance for drought allowing it to survive in the dry heat our area can produce.

Goldenrod is great in large massing as well as spotted into a mixed perennial garden. The late blooms are welcomed when some of the standard summer blooming plants have finished flowering.