

COLUMNS

Campbell Vaughn: These spring blooms are showstoppers in your yard

Campbell Vaughn Augusta Chronicle

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I get so excited this time of year that I can barely contain myself. There is no way I cannot talk about spring-blooming plants.

There are some species that are flowering now that are such showstoppers. Don't let March Madness keep you from enjoying these amazing blooming plants.

Azaleas are ubiquitous in the South and seem to have loved the cold weather this past winter. The evergreen varieties were introduced from Asia and have found an immigration policy that most landscapes approve. Indica, Kurume, Gumpo, and Formosa varieties of azaleas are common to the landscape and will fill an entire plant with blooms.

If you want to see something that looks like it is from another planet, look at the deciduous native azaleas. The pink to white blooming Piedmont azaleas (*Rhododendron canescens*) can be found from time to time growing in the moist filtered shade of the forest and have grown in popularity in nursery stock. The blooms have an alien, spider-like flower that covers the perimeter of the shrub.

If you aren't a pink and white fan, there is a native Florida type of azalea (*Rhododendron calendulaceum*) that has some bright to deep orange colors. A buddy of mine sent me a picture of one of these "Florida" azaleas blooming this week, asking me what it was. The picture was fantastic because it was in full bloom, with tons of giant pale orange flowers, and about 10 feet tall.

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A great addition to the landscape for a spectacular bloom is a tree with white hydrangea-like blooms. But they aren't hydrangeas. They are Chinese snowball viburnums (*Viburnum macrocephalum*).

This large deciduous shrub can reach 20 feet in height, and as the blooms begin to show, they have a lime green color that then turns into an explosion of white. The snowballs will load the entire shrub if the conditions are right.

The plant isn't the prettiest during the rest of the season, but it is unparalleled when the large white flowering balls are peaking. I love putting them in the background so that they can pop through the landscape in spring and hide behind some other interesting plants when they are not flowering. I like this plant so much that I have two in my yard.

It pains me to say it because I am such an advocate for the eradication of invasives, but the Chinese wisteria (*Wisteria sinensis*) is incredible right now. I had to drive to Clarkesville this week, and it is everywhere. The fragrant purple drooping flowers hanging from vines high in the trees are blooming all over the place.

This deciduous vine will grab onto and wrap around almost any structure it touches. When the vine grabs, it takes off. It would be more appropriate to measure the growth in feet per week than in inches. A prolific seeder, the Chinese wisteria has taken over the southern U.S., but it sure is fun to watch right now.

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A native bloomer that has emerged in grandiose form this spring in our favorite southern understory tree, the flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*). This dogwood is deciduous, typically growing 15- to 25-feet tall, and can be found from Maine to Florida.

In our hot, humid climates, flowering dogwoods like a little protection from the hot summer western exposure sun. I love dogwoods for their incredible red fall color, unique irregular form, and red berries that the mockingbirds love.

This is the peak of spring, and it doesn't get much better than these few weeks, so get out and enjoy the bounty of blooms.