Shrubs and Trees for a Warmer Seattle

By Christina Pfeiffer

Our local climate has been described as “modified Mediterranean” and is characterized by its predominant patterns of winter rain and summer drought. But as we all know, this climate is undergoing further modification. Over the past few years, average regional temperatures have been trending slightly upward, expanding our growing season earlier into spring and later into fall. Winters have been warmer and wetter, while summers have been hotter and drier. Long-term climate change predictions for our region say these recent trends will become the norm.

So, when it comes to sustainable plant selection in the Pacific Northwest, it’s becoming increasingly imperative that we choose plant species with strong adaptations to winter rain and summer drought. As time goes by, species native to regions that receive significant rainfall during the growing season (think China and eastern North America) will become even more prone to drought-related stress and secondary pest problems.

TOP: Hardy fuchsia blooming in the Arboretum in September. (Photo by Niall Dunne)
INSET: Kinnikinnick produces handsome, bird-friendly berries that persist into winter. (Photo by Jesse Taylor/Wikimedia Commons)
We’re already starting to see this happen. One example is the increased decline and mortality among European weeping birch (*Betula pendula*) trees in the Seattle area. Drier growing seasons have left it more susceptible to damage by the bronze birch borer (*Agrilus anxius*), which is attracted to stressed trees. Katsura (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum*) and eastern dogwood (*Cornus florida*) also have been showing increased drought stress symptoms in recent years. With decreasing snow pack in the mountains and less stored water in our reservoirs, it will likely become ever more difficult to provide adequate irrigation for these types of trees. Some of our regional native species will also be affected. Indeed, we’re already seeing some dieback and stress-related maladies, such as the appearance of drought-related dead tops in Douglas fir and western red cedar trees in planted and native sites, as well as the broad spread of heavy bark beetle damage to conifers throughout the West.

The sustainable design mantra of “right plant, right place” reminds us not only to seek out plants with natural adaptations to the winter rain/summer drought climate pattern, but also to take a harder look at plants that enjoy just a little more summer heat, such as native plants that grow in climate zones to the south of us. Following are short profiles of trees and shrubs that I have seen retaining a good appearance through long, dry seasons and through periods of higher summer temperatures. These selections are also suitable to average garden conditions and are well adapted for wet winters.

**Vine Hill Manzanita** *(Arctostaphylos densiflora)*

Native to Southern California, this medium-sized mounding shrub produces dense, glossy evergreen foliage and sports beautiful, cinnamon-colored bark. Clusters of urn-shaped white or pink flowers cover the plant in late winter and early spring and attract hummingbirds and bees. Mature specimens can reach nearly five feet high and wide. The cultivar *A. densiflora* ‘Howard McMinn’ is one of the most popular and dependable manzanitas grown in our area. Though it thrives in conditions similar to those enjoyed by its cousin, the Pacific madrone (*Arbutus menziesii*)—sunny sites, with well-drained, low-fertility soils—it can be grown in richer loam soils and some shade. The trunks of older specimens take on a gnarled, deep burgundy, madrone-like appearance.

**Kinnikinnick** *(Arctostaphylos uva-ursi)*

This evergreen species is native over a very broad range across the northern hemisphere. In the Pacific Northwest, it grows wild from
Alaska to the San Francisco Bay area. This work-horse groundcover remains a strong choice for Northwest gardens. It forms a low, wide mat of small, glossy, paddle-shaped, dark-green leaves that turn reddish-purple in fall. Clusters of bell-shaped white or pink flowers appear in spring and develop into handsome, bird-friendly red berries that persist into winter.

**Bottlebrush (Callistemon species)**
This genus of shrubs from the myrtle family is native to Australia and ruggedly drought tolerant in full sun. All species have narrow, pointed, evergreen leaves and produce stunning, bottlebrush-shaped flowers on the previous year’s growth. The most commonly seen species here, *Callistemon citrinus*, can be grown as a large shrub or trained from a young age into a small tree, around 20 feet tall. It offers vivid-green foliage and bright-red spring-to-summer flowers. *Callistemon linearis var. pumila* is a medium-sized shrub with arching branches and crimson summer blooms. *Callistemon salignus* has willow-like foliage with pale, creamy flowers. Several more forms can be seen in the Australia Entry Garden at Pacific Connections in the Arboretum.

**Hardy Fuchsia (Fuchsia magellanica)**
This native of southern Argentina and Chile has proved long-lived and reliable in Northwest gardens. It performs well in sun to light shade on fertile, well-drained soil, and it grows back strongly from the roots when knocked back by a

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**OPPOSITE LEFT:** *Arctostaphylos densiflora* ‘Howard McMinn’ is one of our most popular and dependable manzanitas. (Photo by Christina Pfeiffer)

**OPPOSITE RIGHT:** The bright-red bottlebrush flowers of *Callistemon citrinus*. (Photo by Christina Pfeiffer)

**ABOVE:** *Garrya x issaquahensis* blooming in the Witt Winter Garden at the Arboretum in early February. (Photo by Niall Dunne)
cold winter or from drastic renovation pruning. Hummingbirds are drawn to the drooping, red-and-violet flowers all summer long. Deciduous in our region, the plant’s arching stems—with their light, peeling bark—add winter interest.

Silktassel (*Garrya* species)
Several species and cultivars of *Garrya* are featured in the Arboretum’s collections, most notably in the Witt Winter Garden. Native to the Pacific Northwest, these large, broadleaf evergreen shrubs are highly drought tolerant. The leaves are roundish, with wavy margins. Striking, long, pale-green catkins appear during winter. Male plants and cultivars such as ‘James Roof’ and the hybrid ‘Issaquahensis’ produce especially long tassels. Best planted where it has lots of room to spread, the plant can also be trimmed a sheared hedge. Prune immediately after flowering to retain the best bloom performance.

Crape Myrtle (*Lagerstroemia*)
Here is a tree for all seasons: rich-green, small leaves, large floral trusses on new wood in late summer, brilliant red-to-orange fall color, and mottled, peeling bark in winter. New cultivars (hybrids of the Asian species *Lagerstroemia indica* and *L. fauriei*) introduced by the U.S. National Arboretum are reliable performers. Two of these cultivars, ‘Natchez’ and ‘Muskogee’, can be seen near the Visitors Center in the Arboretum. A broad variety of cultivars are on display at the far east parking lot at the Center for Urban Horticulture. Crape myrtle is a great plant for those warm microclimate spots in the garden. It performs well in sandy loams to clay soils with good drainage and is best grown with lower nutrients.

Mahonia (*Mahonia/Berberis* species)
As a group, all of the native and ornamental forms of *Mahonia* show excellent drought resiliency. *Mahonias* are best grown as understory plants in light shade and well-drained soils. All have evergreen compound leaves with spine-tipped lobes and produce lovely, dense spikes of yellow flowers. Readily reaching 10 feet in height, winter-blooming *Mahonia* ‘Arthur Menzies’ is probably the tallest. Our native *Mahonia nervosa*,

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**TOP LEFT:** Fall foliage on a ‘Muskogee’ crape myrtle in the Arboretum. (Photo by Joy Spurr)

**TOP RIGHT:** *Mahonia x media* ‘Arthur Menzies’ blooming in the Winter Garden at the Arboretum in January. (Photo by Niall Dunne)
longleaf mahonia, has a stoloniferous habit and grows to just two or three feet tall. It blooms between April and June and then develops waxy blue berries in late summer. The rich, glossy green leaves turn purple in winter. Some taxonomists now consider *Mahonia* plants as part of the genus *Berberis*, the barberries. Deciduous and evergreen forms of barberries are another top choice for long-term performance and tolerance to warm and dry growing seasons.

**California Wax Myrtle**  
(*Morella/Myrica californica*)

Native to the Pacific coast, from southern Washington through California, this broadleaf evergreen is often used in screens and mass plantings. Left to assume its natural habit, it grows well into a small, 15- to 30-foot tree, with a loose, open crown. It has pale bark and narrow, glossy, two- to four-inch leaves. The late-spring flowers are nothing to write home about, but the dark purple fruits that appear in fall are very appealing to birds. California wax myrtle does best in full sun or partial shade and can handle damp spots and summer drought.

**Evergreen Oaks**  
(*Quercus garryana* and *Q. ilex*)

Oregon white oak (*Quercus garryana*), or garry oak, is being more broadly planted in the Puget Sound region. Young trees can take on an irregular form, while mature trees grow to 40 feet or more and develop a broad crown. The rich-green, round-lobed leaves bear a rusty down on their undersides. Garry oak is best grown on well-drained, sandy soils. The Holm, or holly, oak (*Quercus ilex*) is a Mediterranean native that has long performed well in Seattle as a street and garden tree. It grows 30 to 40 feet tall and wide. The leaves have a narrow, oval shape with a pointed tip; their downy undersides are gray to yellow. Both of these trees bear relatively small acorns.

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