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The Vine Line



We are now in what I would call the Second Phase of our Mid-South Spring. Most of the traditional spring flowering bulbs, such as Tulips, Daffodils and Hyacinths have finished blooming or are about to do so. The many cultivars of Japanese Cherries are already just a memory and Redbuds are just past peak bloom. These are, plus many other less known species have been brightening landscapes all over the Mid-South for the past couple of months.

Now as we move into early April, three plants seem to dominate our gardens as they explode into bloom. Azaleas, Dogwoods and Wisteria seem to be everywhere! Isn't it funny that most non-gardeners only notice plants when they are in bloom?

Azaleas are favorites of almost everyone. While there are native Southeastern species, the majority of the Azaleas in our gardens are Asian in origin. The majority Most are evergreen. There are literally hundreds of varieties. Almost every shade of red, pink, white and purple that you could imagine, plus bi-colors and even yellow and orange. Sorry, there are no blue blooms.

The three most common groups in bloom now are Kurume, Southern Indica, and Glen Dale Hybrids. There are close to 300 cultivars in the Glen Dale hybrids alone. Azaleas are classified as Rhododendrons, but what most people think of as Rhododendrons are the large broadleaf evergreen plants that bloom later in the spring in the mountains of East

Tennessee. Because they like cooler temperatures and great drainage, they seldom make satisfactory garden plants in our part of the state.

All Azaleas have shallow root systems and like humus rich, but well drained, slightly acid soil. Most of the native species are a little harder to cultivate than the hybrids, but are worth the effort. The natives are all large plants, most of them can be anywhere from 6 to 12 feet in height. They are deciduous, so most of the early flowering species bare their blooms before the plant leafs out for the season. They do not respond well to pruning to control their size. They do make magnificent specimens when grown in the right situation. They are extremely appropriate in a shady woodland setting. Some of the native species such as the Plumleaf Azalea, *Rhododendron prunifolium*, sports it's orange blooms as late as July.

Encore Azaleas are relative newcomers to the Azalea scene. There is an article in this month's Southern Living magazine that talks about how these complicated reblooming azaleas were developed by Buddy Lee of Transcend Nursery in Louisiana. The Encore will bloom several times a season if managed correctly. They have a great range of colors and a variety of sizes at maturity. They even like a little more sun than other Azaleas. My only caution with this group is to watch what you have nearby in fall blooming perennials or fall color of foliage. Purple or pink Azaleas might not be the perfect foil for bronze mums or the yellow autumn foliage on a Japanese maple.



It seems like everyone loves the **Flowering Dogwood**, *Cornus florida*. This native understory tree has a fairly large range, occurring east of the Mississippi as well as parts of some adjacent states to the West. It is a true woodland species and really suffers when planted in full sun. It really likes similar conditions similar to those that were mentioned with Azaleas. Planting in sunny lawn means a denser tree without the graceful, well-spaced horizontal branches seen on shade grown specimens.

They need attention paid to not allowing them to dry out, especially in the summer months. Seeds spread by birds will often germinate under larger trees and turn into good specimens if left to their own devices. Like all flowering trees, the American Dogwood is relatively short lived, probably 30 to 40 years would be an old one, where an Oak or Maple can live a hundred years or some even twice that age. That being said, Dogwoods are definitely worth planting. Their white or pink blooms (which are technically bracts, only the yellow center is the bloom) are an anticipated part of our spring.

Wisteria is a plant that almost everyone loves when in bloom. The lavender or sometimes white racemes are breathtaking, swaying in a spring breeze. Yet for the rest of the year a rapidly growing *Wisteria sinensis* or Chinese Wisteria can be more than a handful. If grown on an arbor or trellis if and not pruned several times a season, it tends to overwhelm the structure and pull it down over time with its increasing great weight. Worse yet, it can twine around a large tree, even big Oaks and Sycamores . It can pull down branches or cover up the foliage of its host and set it into decline.

One solution is to grow Chinese Wisteria as a small tree. There are several in Memphis that I am aware of and they can be stunning. Start with a nursery grown plant or root a cutting from a vine that you have seen blooming (seedlings can take many years before they flower). Plant at the base of a stout stake, preferably a metal one, the height you want the tree. Five to eight feet is manageable. Keep it pruned to a single vine (or trunk). When it grows to the top of the stake, top it and continue to shape it. Over 3 or 4 years you will have a really cool weeping Wisteria tree that you will be proud of each spring

when in bloom. Warning, if you get tired of maintaining it, pull it out, so that it doesn't end up vining up one of your neighbor's trees!

Another possibility is American wisteria, *Wisteria frutescens*. This native vine has smaller lavender flowers than its Chinese cousin, but on a much smaller vine that is far easier to maintain. If it does escape into the wild, it is a Southeastern native, so no harm done. The cultivar 'Amethyst Falls' is readily available in nurseries. This is the wisteria that I would choose if I wanted to plant one on an arbor. This is one of those times when the native species is definitely the best choice.

While sheltering in place, remember if you look for it, there is beauty all around you.



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