



Search the world for plants, but some

Several years of intense drought in the state have been a blessing in disguise for the Wyoming gardener!

There is renewed interest by the horticulture industry in discovering and bringing beautiful native and adapted plant materials to market that fit Wyoming conditions. One can literally buy plants that have been cultivated from the globe's most extreme environments – from the high elevations of Chile, China, South America, and Afghanistan to the ancient ruins of Greece.

But there is another extreme environment – Wyoming, where some outstanding plants are making their way to market. In 2005, I had the chance to explore Wyoming's rugged environment to investigate the state's native trees and shrubs for their landscape potential, and what I found excited me! Call them true Wyoming survivors, but I prefer to call them beautiful ornamentals! Many people might not be familiar with these species. Here is but a taste.

Curl-leaf mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus ledifolius* Nutt.). Found throughout the foothill country of the Big Horn and other Wyoming mountain ranges on limestone outcrops, this broadleaf evergreen shrub is as rugged and long living as almost any plant in the world. It has an upright habit with dark green, leathery leaves with edges curling under – giving its name! Most winters, the leaves will stay green, which adds seasonal interest. Specimens found on the southern slopes of

the Big Horns are estimated to be at least 2,000 years old or older! Once established, this plant may never need watering again. It's slow growing, but one can purchase plants that are about 2 feet tall and within 10 years should easily be 4 to 6 feet tall.

Full sun. Height: 8-20 feet. Width: 6-10 feet. May take centuries for mature height and width to be achieved!

Bigtooth maple (*Acer grandidentatum* Nutt.). An outstanding native considered a small tree with dark-green leaves having up to five lobes. The leaves turn shades of yellow, orange, and red in autumn. Ecologists have theorized this maple and the sugar maple of the northeastern United States are essentially the same tree but developed separately as ice ages came and went. It is found along Wyoming's southwestern edge. Some call it "mountain maple," but the great thing about this tree is that it can tolerate the state's mostly alkaline soils and survive periods of drought once established. After establishment, an occasional deep watering is all that is needed to keep it looking great. This is one of the best-kept secrets in the horticulture industry!

Full sun to partial shade. Zone 3. Height: 20-25 feet. Mature height within 15 years, if watered more frequently. Width: 15-20 feet.

Utah serviceberry (*Amelanchier utahensis* Koehne). Found in the high desert prairie in western



Curl-leaf mountain mahogany



Bigtooth maple



Rock spirea



Skunkbush sumac

gems exist in our own backyard

and southern Wyoming where wind and the elements are as severe as anywhere, and they look great! This is a very dense deciduous shrub with leaves that have a wooly, gray-green appearance – which is quite pleasing to the eye. In autumn, its color is a golden yellow. In spring, the whole plant is covered with a mass of white flowers followed by edible, bluish-black fruit in summer – Wyoming’s version of the blueberry. It’s a great windbreak specimen!

Full sun. Zone 3 Height: 6-12 feet. Mature height within 15 years. Width: 6-8 feet. An occasional deep watering after establishment is all that is needed.

Skunkbush sumac (*Rhus trilobata* Nutt. var. *trilobata*). Found throughout Wyoming’s prairies and open slopes of mountains. Also known as three-leaf sumac, this is a very rugged, deciduous shrub with multiple stems having oak-like leaves that turn brilliant red to orange in autumn. This shrub basks in full sun, and wind is not even an issue. It’s tolerant of most soils but is intolerant of flooding and high water tables! Water during dry periods via a traditional sprinkler system. Supplemental watering from any source and this plant will outpace and outgrow their native dryland cousins.

Full sun. Zone 3. Height: 3-6 feet. Mature height within 10 years. Width: 4-7 feet.

Rock spirea (*Holodiscus dumosus*). A compact shrub found in the crevices of rocks and gravelly soil in mountain foothills. Beautiful, white-to-pink flowers adorn the plant in June. In autumn, the flowers dry to a russet color, and the foliage turns reddish. When the leaves are crushed, they emit a provocative, spicy fragrance. Good drainage is absolutely necessary. The plant will grow in amended and unamended soils but not heavy clay soils with poor drainage.

Full sun. Zone 3. Height: 2-4 feet. Width: 2-4 feet.

If these plants are of interest, visit with a knowledgeable local nursery representative for more information including availability.

Detailed information about each plant can be found on the Natural Resources Conservation Service’s PLANTS Database at plants.usda.gov. Each species listed will add to your western landscape!

References:

Xeriscape Plant Guide, 1996, Denver Water and American Water Works Association, Fulcrum Publishing ISBN 1-55591-322-9

Water Wise Native Plants for Intermountain Landscapes, 2003, Wendy Mee et.al, Utah State University Press. ISBN 0-87421-561-7

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