

BY HILDA BRUCKER

Lo, the Loropetalums Shrubs For All Seasons



Photos by Peter Hogg, courtesy of Monrovia

'Monraz' is one of the many new pink-flowering loropetalums.

“I was sorry because I had no loropetalum, and then I met a man who had no snowdrop.” With tongue in cheek, famed garden columnist Henry Mitchell wrote these words two decades ago. The only loropetalum then known to gardeners was the original species—*Loropetalum chinense*, an under used evergreen shrub. But, oh, how things have changed since then! If the great man were alive now, I would bet he’d trade his snowdrops in a heartbeat to get his hands on one of the modern loropetalum cultivars. Bright flowers, burgundy foliage and a graceful, arching habit combine to give today’s loropetalums

year-round appeal. And loropetalum is a stunning addition to any southern garden.

Loropetalum belongs to the family Hamamelidaceae, making it a kissing cousin to the witch hazels. The shrub that Mitchell pined for was evergreen and bloomed in mid-spring with white flowers composed of four fringe-like petals. It was a bit nondescript, however, and never became a popular choice among gardeners or commercial growers.

In the early 1990s, however, when the pink-flowered selections made their debut, they took the green industry by storm. Often classified as *Loropetalum chinense* var. *rubrum*, these

cultivars are now readily available at garden centers wherever winters are mild.

Smallish, oval leaves give the pink-flowered loropetalum a fine texture, and supple, willowy branches impart a flowing shape. Its tendency not to grow upright, but to arch out sideways, often makes the shrub appear wider than it is high, though many will sport individual branches that extend up to 10 feet tall.

Most cultivars put out plum-colored new growth, which eventually matures to a dark olive or purplish green. When cool weather arrives in fall, the foliage glows in a deep burgundy shade. And as the autumn days wane, loropetalum continues to shine, adding interest and color to the winter landscape.

I've found that a subtle shift occurs as my garden settles down for the cold months—my loropetalum ceases to be just a backdrop and becomes a focal point instead with its branches arching above a variegated *Daphne odora* and weeping down over a low bird-bath. During warm spells in December and January, loropetalum will delight by throwing out a few colorful, sporadic blossoms—just a little taste of what's to come.

In early spring, usually March, loropetalum will be in its full glory. The hot pink flowers are like little tassels, composed of delicate, fringe-like petals. The blossom show starts slowly, but by the time the shrub reaches its peak, it can rival an azalea in full bloom. Altogether, you can expect three weeks of full flowering from loropetalum.

I happened to underplant one of mine with a creeping veronica (*Veronica peduncularis* 'Georgia Blue'), and it was a happy accident to find that the two bloomed at exactly the same time. The brilliant, cobalt blue veronica combined with the fuchsia tassels of the loropetalum was the most spectacular plant combination I had ever seen.

About the time the flush of spring bloom is fading, loropetalum begins putting out new leaves, which range in color from rosy red to bright burgundy. This multi-colored effect continues through much of the growing season.

Amazingly heat tolerant, loropetalum doesn't languish during the dog days of summer. Once it is well established, it's also very accepting of dry conditions. Sound too good to be true? It gets better: loropetalum has no problems with pests or

diseases, it isn't even palatable to deer, and it isn't at all picky about its planting site. From full sun to all but the deepest shade, versatile loropetalum will thrive.

Shrubs can be planted singly as specimens, in a mixed border with bulbs and perennials, as a low, informal hedge to help hide a chain link fence, or massed on a bank for a low-maintenance landscape solution.

Loropetalum attains a mounded, pleasing shape on its own and, if sited correctly, doesn't require pruning. When necessary, select individual branches and trim them back by hand—this is a shrub that should never be sheared.

It's not uncommon for plants to stretch to 10 feet tall and 8 feet wide within five years of being planted. There are even reports of mature specimens that have gained heights of 14 feet and have been pruned into small, multi-trunk trees similar to a crepe myrtle.

There is some question as to loropetalum's hardiness, but it's probably safe to assume that the shrub will survive temperatures down to 0°F. It is recommended for zones 6 through 9. Cold hardiness is probably the biggest issue among breeders who are developing new cultivars, hoping to extend the northern range of this garden-worthy shrub.

With as many as 20 different cultivars of loropetalum on the market today, shopping may get a

little confusing. 'Blush' and 'Burgundy' are two of the earliest introductions and are not hard to find. I've never seen much difference among the flowers, so I tend to choose based on foliage. I prefer the cultivars that retain a purplish tint year round, such as 'Hines Purpleleaf' (also sold under the trademarked name 'Plum Delight') and 'Zhuzhou Fuchsia'.

Two selections, 'Monraz' and 'Ruby', are reputedly more restrained in growth than the others, reaching heights and widths of no more than 5 feet. The ongoing field research of Michael Dirr at the University of Georgia has also identified a unique cultivar, 'Suzanne', that exhibits the same compact growth habit and maintains deeply colored foliage all year long. There are currently 19 different pink-flowered cultivars of loropetalum being studied at UGA.

All things considered, you simply cannot go wrong with any of the pink-flowered loropetalums. They fit in everywhere and no matter what the season, as my next-door neighbor puts it, "they just always look good." 



This loropetalum's pink flowers sizzle against its purple foliage.