

RICHARD CLAYTON BARRETT

Richard Clayton Barrett, ASLA, LLC

Some of Rick's Favorite Plants

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Over the years, I have amassed an incredible knowledge of plants that I have relied on, residentially and commercially. Reliability, Hardiness and ability to perform well in different conditions are the hallmark. There are so many plants out there, but I am not amateur gardening. My clients trust me to use plants that work, so I don't recommend things that are marginally hardy. Of course, plants can live or die in any given situation, but below are some of my favorites, for many reasons.

Shade Trees: Refer to the list "Great Trees for the Kansas City Region" (Robert Whitman)

Sugar Maple: Green Mountain, Fall Fiesta, Autumn Splendor (Caddo) Flashfire (Caddo) + Columnar Sugars if you can find them.

Other Maples: such as Paperbark, Shantung

Oaks: White, Swamp White Oak, Bur, (Columnar Varieties such as Scarlet Letter, Crimson Spire), almost any except Pin Oak.

Black Gum: use varieties, such as Wildfire, Red Rage etc. Fall color is variable here.

There are so many other great trees out there that are underutilized. Such as Yellowwood, Beech, Bald Cypress, Dawn Redwood etc.

Ornamental Trees

Redbud (including Oklahoma and the Newer Designer Redbuds), Dogwoods, All including Kousa, Corneliancherry, Pagoda and June Snow. Never met a dogwood I didn't like, Fringetree, Red Buckeye, Japanese Tree Lilac, Seven Sons Tree, Golden Raintree, Crabapples (with good Disease Resistance and Persistent Fruit), Natives like Serviceberry, Ironwood, Parrotia, Magnolias (nearly all) Japanese Maples, Paw Paw.

Evergreen Trees

Spruce: Norway, Serbian, Oriental, Blue Spruces and their cv + Columnar varieties

Pines: a lot of issues with even White Pines now. I use pines on an as needed basis. Vanderwolf was the go-to replacing a lot of Scotch and Austrian, but they are not as pyramidal as the name implies and it has not performed well for me. Don't recommend it anymore.

Arborvitae: Green Giant and Emerald have their places, (Shade) just don't overuse them and make sure they are irrigated

Fir: White Fir (Concolor Fir)

Holly: hardest is American Holly, seems to be the most difficult to consistently find. Meserve's such as Centennial Girl, or Castle Spire

Southern Magnolia: Brackens or other cv. Hardy. Understand it is a southern plant, so be ready for it to shed leaves and re-leaf every spring.

Shrubs

Hydrangeas: (one of my favorite Genus's of Plants)

Panicled: varieties including the dwarf varieties. Limelight, Quickfire, Plus the Dwarf Versions. All Good, bloom on new wood. Fine for Full Sun Applications.

Arborescens: varieties including Annabelle, Invincibelle Spirit, Invincibelle Lace, Haas Halo (#1 Pollinator Hydrangea), Native Hydrangea arborescens. Blooms on new wood. Below is the 110 year old Garden Variety Annabelle.



Below is Haas Halo -#1 Pollinator Hydrangea. Becoming more popular. WELL worth seeking out.



The Incrediball variety (Supposedly an improved Annabelle) sports bigger flowers and grows taller and wider. That is fine if you have full sun. if you put Incrediball in the shade it will stretch and end up on the ground in every rain, so I always prefer Annabelle unless it is a full sun situation. Also, for pruning these new wood bloomers, I always recommend cutting back to 24-36-48" tall every spring (depending on variety) This removes the old spent blooms but leaves the stems to become thicker, firmer and allows them to remain turgid under bloom weight. If you cut them back hard (some people do) then the stems are all new growth and will not hold the blooms up well. Peony Rings can also be employed. As the plant grows, they will not be seen. Just an FYI

Oakleafs: (all varieties) bloom on 2nd year wood, so only shape within a month after blooming.

Climbing: Hydrangea – have a sturdy support

Macrophylla varieties (Old Standard Varieties or the Newer Endless Summer cvs). Over the years we have had more calls about these varieties not blooming than all the other varieties combined. It will vary from year to year, depending on the winter weather. The bloom buds are formed the fall before, so depending on whether those buds survive the winter

has a lot to do with the number of blooms for spring. This year (2025) has been exceptional, and the deep freezes were not enough to kill off the buds and we are experiencing a lot of great blooms from these. The previous 5 years not so much. Personally, I don't have room in my garden for something that may or may not bloom reliably so I prefer hydrangeas that are bud hardy or bloom on new wood. If you MUST have Blue Hydrangeas, then the tried-and-true varieties are out there. Do your research and you may have to purchase them online. Most sold in commerce here are the Endless Summer Group. If you can stand to do it, get the "Blue" color in your garden using other Plants like Bellflower, Salvia, Baptisia, Veronica, Russian Sage, Larkspur or Blue Cloud Calamint

Viburnums: a great group, except Leatherleaf and its cousins. Becomes a monster. I never recommend it. It's too hard to control over a long period of time. Carlesi, Prague, Juddi are favorites.

Boxwoods, Yews, Junipers: All have a place in the landscape. Depending on what you are trying to accomplish using them. some of the best gardens in the world use these to create the structure or bones of the garden.

Azaleas and Rhododendrons: wonderful, just must make sure they get the soil condition they want. Soil PH of 4.5 to 5.0 is ideal. Place properly as woodland plants or N or E exposure. Best not in full sun in the winter.

Other great Shrubs: underutilized. Bottlebrush Buckeye, Vernal Witch hazel, Fothergilla, Spicebush

Honorable mention: Ninebark, Spireas, Weigelia. There are many cv available. use in the right spot.

Perennials: Too many to name, but you must plant Milkweeds, the host plant for the Monarchs. It would be a crime if we let the Monarchs perish because we sprayed them, removed their habitat and crowded out our gardens with "new" varieties of plants, and we KNEW they were struggling. Take your pick to compliment the Milkweeds, from Astilbe to Columbine to Goats beard to Phlox, to your family favorites.

Bee & Pollinator plants: Must have including Goldenrod, Lavender, Coneflowers, Bee Balm, Black Eyed Susans etc. There are a multitude of Pollinators for Bees and Butterflies. Always include them. They are essential and are important for healthy ecosystems and food production. They provide nectar and pollen which in turn provide for the reproduction of many of our food crops. One of my favorite resources is the Grow Native Top 10 Lists. (Grownative.org) You will find many plants you didn't know existed and can have a lot of fun trying them and helping our planet. Just a few of my favs are Wild Blue Indigo, Indian Pink, Aromatic Aster, Golden Groundsel, Penstemon cv. Virginia Bluebells, Culver's Root, Leadplant, Liatris, Snow on the Mountain (Eupatorium) etc. One that flies under the radar is Purple Rocket (Iodanthus pinnatifidus) find this plant and buy more than one! And by the way, the new Hybrid varieties of Coneflower in those fabulous colors are not attractive to pollinators. I always use the natives.

Understand that many of the plant selections will be driven by availability at the nurseries, unless you venture out on the web to find something not available locally. I have done that with some great success. And there are some smaller nurseries/sources that are worth seeking out locally.

Finally, this list is by no means comprehensive. There are many great resources out there, but the voices of experience count for a lot. That's why you won't find things like Prairie Gold Aspen on my recommended list. And of course, my caution about Endless Summer Hydrangea not performing well enough for me to recommend it. Can the plants be grown here, of course they can. But these plants did not perform as advertised in numerous situations in my career, and now, I would never plant them for myself. Enough said.

Remember to always consult the "Genius of the Place". Every site has some unique attributes just waiting to be found and brought to light. This tapping into the "Spirit" of the place creates a more harmonious design, drawing from the topography, existing vegetation, and history of the site. Owing this concept to Alexander Pope, Capability Brown and Humphrey Repton in 17th Century England, this allows the design to be appearing naturally, unforced, as if it were meant to be there. This concept allows us to work with the site and not impose our will on it. Long term benefits include being environmentally friendly, creating a sense of place and connection for the user, and ultimately lower maintenance costs.

For my wonderful Clients over the years, I am forever in your debt. Many have become more than Clients, Dear friends. Hope the experience for you was as grand as it was for me. Keep Designing and Gardening!! Have Fun with it and I'll see you in the garden, or at the nursery!!

Rick

Favorite Plants
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