

Fothergillas – The Unsung Shrub

As I drive around the suburban landscape, I am often shocked at the number of plants that are selected for their blue or yellow foliage or for their pendulous or columnar habits. Whatever happened to a plant with quiet dignity? A plant that is happy to provide form, flower and fall color to an outdoor garden room, give support to other plants, yet not scream ‘here I am’. Fortunately there is hope. *Fothergilla gardenii* (Dwarf Fothergilla) and *Fothergilla major* (Large Fothergilla) are two such candidates. A member of the Witchhazel family, *Fothergilla* is named after John Fothergill, a British physician and gardener, who funded William Bartrams famed plant explorations throughout the Eastern U.S. during the 1700’s.

Fothergilla gardenii, Dwarf Fothergilla is the smaller cousin, as the common name might suggest! Growing to 4-6’ in height, the leaves are also slightly smaller in comparison to its cousin, reaching 2” in length, as compared to 4”. This species also has a suckering habit, while Large Fothergilla is clump forming. Dwarf Fothergilla is native from North Carolina to Florida, appearing primarily in moist or boggy locations along the Coastal Plain. The species epithet honors Alexander Garden, a Scottish physician and botanist. Living in what is now South Carolina, he discovered a plant of Dwarf Fothergilla near his home in 1765. As a side note, Alexander Garden is also honored through the genus *Gardenia*. Dwarf Fothergilla produces 1-2” long white by 1” diameter bottlebrush flowers in late April into early May. The flowers usually appear in advance of the foliage, and are sweetly scented. Foliage is an attractive bluish green throughout the summer. In autumn, the leaves turn shocking shades of reds, oranges and yellows, with the best coloration occurring in the sun. It is essential that the plants are located in an area with adequate moisture during the summer months. A beautiful 5’ tall specimen died to the ground one summer during a prolonged period of drought.

Fothergilla major, the Large Fothergilla, is located in the more mountainous regions of North Carolina, West to Tennessee. It is a slightly larger plant in all regards. The stems are thicker and courser, the leaves are larger, and the plant grows to 10’ in height. Flower size and fragrance is the same as Dwarf Fothergilla. The flowers usually appear with the emerging foliage, about 1-2 weeks after those of the Dwarf Fothergilla. The foliage remains attractive throughout the summer, and then develops a saturnalia of colors during the autumn, with oranges, reds, yellows and ambers. In winter, the branches are crooked and twisted, and cast beautiful shadows on the snow; an interesting effect is but appreciated by only the purest plant lover! Since the plant is native to more mountainous regions, it is not as susceptible to drought damage. However, prolonged stress will result in premature fall coloration and leaf drop.

There are two cultivars that have gained widespread recognition. *Fothergilla major* ‘Mount Airy’ has proven to be a very dependable plant for use in residential and parkland sites. It has foliage similar to Large Fothergilla, but it only grows to 8 foot in height, and has a strong suckering habit, leading some to believe it is an interspecific (*F. major* x *F. gardenii*) cross. It has proven cold hardy to –25 F, and provides excellent spring floral and autumn foliage displays. *Fothergilla gardenii* ‘Blue Mist’ is the other cultivar that is often seen in the market. The plant has a very attractive blue tint to the foliage, which lends itself to working well in the mixed border. Unfortunately, it has a weaker growth habit, appears less winter hardy than some of its

cousins, and has a weak yellow fall color. New to the market is *F. major* 'Blue Shadow. Also possessing blue tinted foliage, it has a much stronger growth habit and the awesome fall color of the species. It is proving itself to be a plant with great garden potential.

Yes, there finally is a noble plant that is not demanding of one's attention with golden or blue foliage. Look to *Fothergilla* for a great backbone plant of quiet dignity that will add seasonal interest to the garden and combine well with other shrubs and perennials.