Thorny pyracanthas ablaze with colorful berries

Landscape plants that bear colorful berries add interest to dull winter landscape as well as provide food and cover for wildlife. There are several tried-and-true berry bearers that can be recommended for area landscapes. One hardy berry producer for Northwest Florida is *Pyracantha coccinea*.

Its thorns and brilliant berries give pyracantha its common name of scarlet firethorn. These evergreen shrubs fill with showy, white blossoms in Spring and are followed by quarter-inch berries that mature an orange to red color for displays October through February. The bright orange-red berries are actually pomes, like berry-size apples.

While the berries are its claim to fame, its thorns are an obvious downside.

The thorns limit its use in landscape plantings, as does the size and gangly growth of most cultivars. Many cultivars are medium to fast growing plants that can reach heights of 6 to 18 feet.

Pyracantha, in general, has lost its landscape pizzazz and is not as widely used as it once was. Although newer, more disease-resistant dwarf cultivars may once again put this plant back into the landscape.

‘Red Elf’ is an attractive, compactly branched, rounded shrub that only reaches about 2 feet tall and wide. It makes an effective low hedge or divider. It is also a disease-resistant variety.

‘Lowboy’ is another low-growing cultivar. It is a handsome, low spreader that produces small but abundant creamy white flowers then bright orange berries. Its vigorous nature makes it an effective ground cover or bank cover. This fast grower reaches 2 to 3 feet tall and 6 to 8 feet wide.

Pyracanthas grow well in slightly acidic, well-drained soils. They’re fairly drought-tolerant once established and do best when planted in full sun or shifting shade. This shrub can be very difficult to transplant and once established, should be left in that area.

The rapid growth makes pyracantha anything but low-maintenance. And you have to be careful when you’re pruning, which detractors say is every other day. Besides avoiding thorns, you’ll want to avoid...
removing future berries, which grow on year-old wood.

On the other hand, the larger pyracanthas' rapid growth and almost vining habit make them easy to trellis and to espalier, or train to grow flat against a fence or wall. They can be really striking espaliers on large walls.

Pyracanthas are a good accent shrub and thorny barrier for the landscape. Topiaries and plants trained to a trellis often are used near patios, entrances and along walkways. Plantings also can be used as a hedge or a backdrop for gardens.

Pyracantha does have another downside. Because it’s in the same family as roses and apples, it’s susceptible to fire blight. This bacterial disease attacks twigs and branches and can kill entire plants.

Perhaps even worse, it's also susceptible to scab. This fungal disease attacks both the foliage and the berries, turning the plant’s best feature into sooty black beads.

Lace bugs are the worst insect pests of pyracanthas. Aphids and scale insects are sometimes problems, too.

But pyracanthas make excellent specimen plants with the two-season appeal of spring flowers and winter berries. They can be great for screening, too. Hardly anything wants to tangle with their thorns.

If you like having birds in your yard, pyracantha berries are sure to attract them. Cedar waxwings especially like the plump, colorful berries.

And if you’re into such things, that rapid growth helps make pyracanthas beautiful bonsai plants. The berry-laden branches of pyracantha also hold up extremely well in cut arrangements and add interest and color to wreaths.

It’s not a plant you’d want to use just anywhere in the landscape, but it has its uses.

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