

(Right) Many high-demand Barberries are produced at Youngblood Nursery. (Left) *Berberis thunbergii* 'Admiration' is a top selling variety. (Bottom) *Berberis linearifolia* 'Orange King' has unique color.

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## The impervious barberry

These top-selling shrubs are durable, beautiful and deer resistant

BY TRACY ILENE MILLER

**O**REGON IS THE number one producer of barberry, selling \$7.7 million worth in 2019, according to the USDA Census of Horticultural Specialties. That's 39% of a nearly \$20 million national market, mostly attributed to Japanese barberry (*Berberis thunbergii*), a plant that has taken a hit with some negative attention in the past 20 years.

*B. thunbergii*, introduced to the United States in the 1800s to replace the native fungus-prone *B. canadensis* (American barberry), started creeping onto state plant invasive lists nearly 100 years later as it was discovered naturalizing in (mostly) forests of the Northeast and Midwest. And then came research from the University of Connecticut linking barberry to the increased harboring of ticks.

As a pest-resistant, deer-resistant, hardy plant, barberry remains a noteworthy landscape plant. Intensive research has been underway to discover and promote sterile or near-sterile varieties. As a result, some of those bans have been reversed. As a significant crop for Oregon growers — barberry is the second highest selling deciduous shrub after hydrangeas — we explore

here the varieties that make this plant a huge draw and the trends that support its continued popularity.

“Demand for the plants has increased heavily,” said Madison Hall of **Youngblood Nursery** (Salem, Oregon), which sells more than 15 kinds of barberry, specializing in finding unique selections, and is always looking for more. “When we release a new variety, people enjoy it. They are drawn because of the variety of colors and the blooms, the variety of habit and shape. And barberry



*Berberis thunbergii* 'Concorde' is noninvasive and offers visual interest all year — yellow flowers in spring, plus burgundy leaves that fade to crimson in fall, and then red berries in winter.

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is pretty much impervious.”

Of all the cultivars, by far, *B. thunbergii* 'Concorde' was consistently named the best-seller by wholesale nurseries. It's one of two top sellers, by a large

margin, at **Blue Heron Nursery** (Corvallis, Oregon), along with *B. thunbergii* 'Admiration', followed by a steep drop to third going to *B. thunbergii* 'Golden Rocket', said owner Ben Dinsdale.

“All three have a lot of the traits that make barberry popular,” he said. “They are not fussy — they are low maintenance — and versatile in the landscape.” Blue Heron's customer base includes wholesale growers, re-wholesalers, landscapers, retail garden centers and municipalities.

### Compact choices

'Concorde' (18–24 inches high by 18–24 inches wide; Zones 4–8) has a wide window of visual interest, with yellow flowers in spring, rich burgundy-purple leaves that fade to crimson in fall, and bright red berries in winter.

“The berries have nonviable seeds, which is a feature of the newer cultivars to try to limit any invasiveness,” Dinsdale said.

'Concorde' is a number-one choice for Bruce Hegna of Nature/Nurture Landscape Design as an edging plant. “They are good plants to repeat, to unify the landscape, and they are something the client doesn't have to worry about pruning every year,” he said. “It's always going to perform, and they don't have to fuss with it.”

Hegna always has clients looking

for deer-resistant plants, and it's a bonus when they are reliable and sturdy like barberry. The burgundy-colored varieties can be used to break up swaths of green, or bring calm and steadiness to a sea of color and perennials, he said.

Like the compact *B. thunbergii* 'Bagatelle' (12–18 inches high by 12–18 inches wide; Zones 4–8), which is Hegna's second most used edging plant after 'Concorde' and is a best-seller at



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## Barberries

'Orange Rocket' has unique red foliage.

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Youngblood. The coppery-red leaves mix with tiny yellowish flowers that turn into bright red berries in fall and last through winter.

"Small-space gardens marry well with barberries," Hall said. "A lot are dwarfs or upright so they are good for that pop of color, and are really attractive for people who are trying to fill a small space, attract birds, keep deer out, or use them as a small hedge, even if you don't have that much space in your yard."

Another best-selling dwarf, 'Admiration' (12–18 inches high by 18–26 inches wide; Zones 4–8), offers a different color palette in a still-small plant, Dinsdale said, with stunning red, glossy oval foliage and golden edges that turn brilliant orange in fall. It offers an eye-catching pop of color in the landscape. "The color is great and for such a long period of interest."

'Admiration' is one of the latest additions at **Alpha Nursery** (Salem, Oregon), said Josh Zielinski, because of high customer demand. Alpha's primary customers include retail garden centers, landscapers and re-wholesalers throughout the United States. The smaller colorful plants of 'Admiration' are good for borders, mass plantings and parking strips, he said.

While landscapers tend to choose the old standbys, Zielinski thinks the brighter colors are on trend for shrubs for gardeners.

Zielinski points to 'Bonanza Gold' (*B. thunbergii* 'Bogozam,' 2 feet high by 3 feet wide; Zones 4–8) as an old standby; one of the older dwarf yellow-type barberries that is still a consistently good performer, sells well, and has a stunning display of bright leaves that turn orange and red in fall, with berries that persist into winter.

"People don't shy away from big, bold

plants; people gravitate toward them," he said. "For advanced gardeners with a more refined taste, they are fun, and new gardeners just see them and go, 'Wow.'"

And "wow" they will go when viewing the sterile Sunjoy Neo (*B. thunbergii* 'NCBT2' PPAF; 2½ feet high by 2½ feet wide; Zones 5–8), a semi-dwarf crack of orange lightning in the spring landscape from Proven Winners and developed by Tom Ranney, professor at the Department of Horticultural Science, North Carolina State University (Mills River, North Carolina). Alpha just added liners of Neo exactly because its brightest orange new growth with a shift to deep orange-red in fall.

"I don't think anyone is going to put a hedge of it in, but the color pop could be used instead of an annual," Zielinski said.

The most recent addition at Blue Heron is another Proven Winner plant, Sunjoy Mini Maroon™ (*B. thunbergii* 'NCBT1' PP30330; 18 inches high by 18 inches wide; Zones 4–8), with deeply purple-red foliage on a compact plant. Developed by Ranney over 10 years, Sunjoy Mini Maroon is a sterile update of 'Crimson Pygmy'. Dinsdale expects to reduce production of at the farm, where its numbers are already in decline. 'Crimson Pygmy' is still a heavily requested plant, but "it's on its way down," he said, as a plant being particularly tagged as invasive in some locations.

And although it's not a best-seller, Dinsdale thinks more attention should be paid to *B. thunbergii* 'Red Carpet' (12 inches high by 4 feet wide; Zones 4–8), a low-growing plant with bright orange new growth that ages to burgundy. That low, spreading habit creates a subtle distinction from other compact barberries, making it useful as a groundcover or for a mass planting.

## Reaching up


For vertical habit and vibrant color, Zielinski said to look at the sterile *B. thunbergii* 'Orange Rocket' PP18411 (4 feet high by 1.5 feet wide; Zones 5–9) for its exciting bright spring flush that ages to a ruby red.

"It adds a nice kind of height element and that bright color," he said. "If that is sitting in the store, with the unique color, it won't stay there long."

'Golden Rocket' (*B. thunbergii* 'Golden Rocket' PP18626; 3–4 feet tall by 2–3 feet wide; Zones 4–8), a best-seller at Blue Heron and a recent addition to the Youngblood catalog, is another stunning, slow-growing smaller shrub producing little to no viable seed. With bright golden foliage that darkens to green, and it's very upright habit with a feathery touch, according to Hall. 'Golden Rocket' has a barberry-specific habit of being low maintenance and tough make it versatile in the landscape — and an upcoming plant.

Alpha Nursery almost stopped producing the upright grower because at first it didn't seem to catch on. Then suddenly, the requests came rolling in.

"So we said we'd better start taking more cuttings!" Zielinski said.

There's a place for the columnar-type barberries in the smaller landscapes of today, Dinsdale said. Like *B. thunbergii* 'Helmond Pillar' (3–4 feet high by 1–2 feet wide; Zones 4–8) with its deeply-rich purple foliage on a slow-growing multi-stemmed shrub. Or, *B. thunbergii* 'Rosy Rocket' (4 feet high by 16 inches wide; Zones 4–8) with the same delicate branching on a nice upright columnar form with showy two-tone pink-and-white young foliage that matures to a deep 

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## Barberries

'Golden Rocket' (right) offers bright color and 'Helmond Pillar' (left) is a tall variety of barberry.

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burgundy purple highlighted by a mass of small, crimson red berries. Dinsdale finds great visual appeal in the tough *B. thunbergii* 'Red Rocket' (5 feet high by 3-4 feet wide; Zones 4-8), with its arcing spray of new growth that comes in slightly variegated and grows bolder with color the more sun it gets. Small yellow flowers in spring are followed by red berries, and the leaf color lasts all summer.

"It gets a nice fade into a great classic fall spectrum," Dinsdale said. It's visually striking and versatile, accepting a hard pruning for a formal edge or a more arcing form with textured shoots, That same arching habit appears on *B. thunbergii* 'Royal Cloak' (3-5 feet high by 3-5 feet wide; Zones 4-8), one of Hall's favorites and a top seller at Youngblood. It's fast-growing with large reddish-purple leaves that emerge red in spring.



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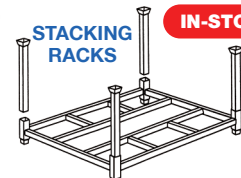


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'Royal Cloak' is a best seller at Youngblood Nursery. PHOTO COURTESY OF YOUNGBLOOD NURSERY



"It has a more open habit, with a natural form and irregular branching that grows upward," Hall said, that can also be shorn into a classic barberry hedge.

### Evergreen, semi-evergreen

Although shipping restrictions on certain varieties are in place for barberry, Hall believes it hasn't dampened interest in the genus, and not just *B. thunbergii*. Customers started asking for *Berberis linearifolia* 'Orange King' (36–48 inches high by 4–6 feet wide, Zones 4–8), an evergreen barberry with lance-like deep-green foliage and clusters of orange flowers in spring followed by blue-black berries. Youngblood had a few large ones in the display garden, and has set out to introduce it on a wider level.

Hall also thinks *Berberis frikartii* 'Amstelveen' (2–3 feet high by 3 feet wide, Zones 6–9) and *Berberis × gagnepainii* 'Chenault' (3–4 feet high by 3–5 feet wide, Zones 5–8), both evergreen to semi-evergreen are overlooked and worth wider recognition. Both bloom with beautiful bright yellow flowers, have berries and keep their leaves all winter. 'Chenault' has an added fall interest of bluish-black fruit and winter interest of bronzy foliage.

When space needs to be filled with a truly large landscape plant, Hegna recommends the Great Plant Pick, Darwin's barberry (*B. darwinii*, 8 feet high by 6 feet wide) for its flowering of orange-colored blooms on a massive evergreen plant.

"When you see it, you immediately want to know what that plant is," Hegna said. "It's a great background plant. The leaves are really small, more like holly leaves, and real dense." It shows off other plants, and the fruits are edible for humans but also birds love them.

Similarly, because of the blooms, the broadleaf evergreen Dwarf Rosemary Barberry (*Berberis × stenophylla* 'Nana', 2–3 feet high by 2–3 feet wide; Zones 6–9), although much smaller, is a perfect accent plant. It's slow growing, requires no pruning, and the shiny leaves are and more needlelike.

"The flowers are a really pretty orange-red in the bud, and then open >>



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## Barberries

'Crimson Pygmy' is paired with 'Sky Pencil' in the landscape. PHOTO BY BRUCE HEGNA



up to a strong yellow color," Hegna said.

For a more traditional use of barberry as a hedge, Hegna uses the evergreen William Penn barberry (*Berberis × gladwynensis* 'William Penn', 4 feet high by 4–6 feet wide; Zones 6–9), which grows dense and full of spines that make it useful at the edges and borders properties. The bonus is the red-tinted fall leaves.

"People are surprised to see evergreen barberries because we are so used to seeing the Japanese barberry," Hegna said.

Of course, many of these he mentioned are not widely grown by nurseries. Hegna hopes that will change, that they would become more available in the trade, because of the wide versatility of these plants and customers' openness to these plants.

Barberries have little or no pest problems and tolerate a variety of locations. They are adaptable and landscapers and garden-

ers can choose from a wide color palette and growth habits for various situations, choosing the right cultivar for the specific situation. Where there are deer problems, barberry comes out on top, and they are also low-maintenance plants, a quality increasingly popular among gardeners.

Because of these attributes, barberry maintains broad appeal. Considerations of invasiveness has generated hesitancy, but new introductions that minimize seed viability can address those concerns.

"I think barberry will continue to be a popular plant, have a place in the landscape, and align with modern values of ecological consideration," Dinsdale said. ☺

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