

The BIG society for small plants

Easy Dwarf Shrubs

Nurseries and garden centres offer many shrubs under the label 'small'. Many are slow-growing rather than truly small, and in time can outgrow their space and overwhelm alpinists and small bulbs in the garden. There is, however, a range of truly dwarf shrubs, ideally suited to the small alpine garden or a trough on a patio.

Why grow dwarf shrubs?

- Evergreen shrubs provide a permanent framework of colour in the garden, when lower-growing alpinists are not in flower.
- Deciduous shrubs do the same, but may also offer attractive autumn colour, extending the season of interest.
- Some shrubs flower outside the main spring and autumn seasons of alpinists and dwarf bulbs.
- A carefully chosen dwarf shrub can be left in place for as long as twenty or thirty years,



Euryops acraeus

needs minimal attention, and will not outgrow its space; this is real labour-saving gardening!



Juniperus communis 'Compressa'

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When is the best time to buy?

Pot-grown dwarf shrubs can be bought at any time of year. It is a good idea to shop at various times of year, as the foliage colour of some plants varies with the seasons, and you may wish to see the plant in flower before buying.



What should I look out for?

- The price will give you an idea of whether the shrub is truly dwarf. A specimen 30 cm tall with a price tag of £2 is likely to grow very quickly when released into the open garden! Typically, the plants of interest will be offered in 7 or 9 cm pots (occasionally larger) and priced at a few pounds.
- Pick up the pot and look underneath. Very long roots dangling from the drainage holes may mean that the plant has been in the pot for too long and is pot bound. This may make it difficult to establish in your garden.
- Inspect the compost surface. Poke your finger into the top. A layer of weeds or liverwort will indicate poor cultivation. If the compost is very high in peat, the plant may not settle down readily in ordinary garden soil.
- Inspect the foliage. Is it a good colour and does it look firm and healthy? Are any new shoots present, short and firm? Pale foliage and soft, lax shoots may indicate that the plants have only recently come out of a polytunnel. If you can't get a better plant elsewhere, your purchase may need to be carefully hardened off (initially protected from cold weather and gradually acclimatised to the open garden) before planting out.
- Check for pests and diseases; poorly grown plants are more vulnerable to both.



When is the best time to plant?

The best time to plant is in March or April, when the soil has begun to warm up, but is still moist. In these conditions, roots grow vigorously and the plants will establish before the warmer, dryer weather arrives. September - October is also a good time if the weather has begun to cool and the soil is moist. You can plant at other times of year, but in summer you will need to ensure that your new plant does not go short of water. Never plant when frost is likely.

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How to plant

Water the pot well a day or two before you plant by standing the pot in water, then remove it and leave to drain. Knock the plant out of the pot and inspect the root ball. If there are roots spiralling around the pot it is a good idea to tease them out. This can be done by gently squeezing the root-ball with your fingers until the shoot tips come free and then gently loosening them. Some growers do the job using a large old dinner fork. If the compost is high in peat, it may be wise to remove as much as half of the compost: peat can easily become completely dry and is very difficult to re-wet; your plant could then die of drought even if your garden soil is moist!

Dig a hole wide enough to accommodate the root ball, and as deep as the longest roots. Hold the shrub in place and then gradually replace the soil, gently working it between the roots with your finger tips and firming gently. Finally, check that the soil surface is at the same level on the stem as the compost in the pot was, then give a thorough watering. If your soil is heavy or clayey do not add drainage or grit to the soil removed from the planting hole; this could produce a sump which fills

with water and drowns your plant later on. A better technique is to plant slightly higher, with the plant in a mound a few inches above the general soil surface. It is even better, of course, to improve the soil in the area well before planting, by digging in compost or drainage material, as appropriate.

If the weather becomes dry in the first few weeks after planting, water your shrub well if it begins to show signs of distress (green foliage losing its gloss, wilting, leaf edges browning or shriveling). It is better to give a thorough watering occasionally than to apply a little water at frequent intervals.

Especially in the first year after planting, a shrub may occasionally form a long shoot. It is best to pinch out any such growth before it hardens, to keep your plant compact and in character.



Plant list

This list includes shrubs which have a good track record. They are robust and slow-growing. The precise rate of growth will depend upon soil conditions and location (plants in a trough will grow much more slowly, for example).

Berberis x stenophylla **'Corallina Compacta'**

A big name for a small plant. Tiny, shiny, holly-like leaves and showers of coral-pink buds opening to yellow flowers in May – June. Sometimes bears plum-purple berries in autumn. Plant in full sun. Rarely exceeds 30 cm tall, perhaps 20 cm wide after 10 years.

Berberis thunbergii 'Aurea'

This form builds up a sphere of striking golden-yellow leaves which make it a desirable shrub for full sun or half shade. Occasionally it forms a very vigorous shoot, which should be ruthlessly pruned out. 30 – 40 cm after 10 years. The recently-introduced 'Tiny Gold' looks likely to be much slower-growing.

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Daphne mezereum

A British native. The strongly scented pink flowers are borne on the bare twigs in winter, followed by red berries. You may see 'Rubra' with very deep, almost red flowers, and 'Alba' or 'Bowles White', both white-flowered forms with yellow berries. Occasionally may reach 90 cm, but slow-growing and never out-competes its neighbours



Jasminum parkeri

From north-west India, this forms a congested, twiggy shrub with three-lobed dark green leaves. Fragrant, bright yellow flowers are freely produced in June, often followed by black berries. Well-drained soil in full sun. Up to 35 cm after ten years. A very vigorous form (or impostor) is sometimes sold under this name, so check on the growth rate with the supplier!



Daphne x transatlantica 'Eternal Fragrance'

The finest recent introduction for the garden. Forms a neat dome to about 60 cm with pale pink flowers. After the main flush in spring, flowers intermittently through the year. Widely available from garden centres and nurseries

Euryops acraeus

From the Drakensburg Mountains in South Africa, this plant needs a warm position with good drainage. It has silver-grey leaves and bright yellow daisy flowers in late spring. Ultimate height and spread about 25 cm.

Forsythia viridissima 'Bronxensis'

This dwarf form originated in America. Primrose yellow flowers appear on the bare stems in spring. Reaches to 30 cm. Pinch out the tips of vigorous shoots to encourage a bushy habit.



Hypericum balearicum

From the Balearic Islands. Highly recommended for a sunny, well-drained position, though possibly not suitable for the coldest gardens. It forms upright branches to about 35 cm clothed with strange, wavy-edged leaves with a warty surface. The glossy yellow flowers with very prominent anthers are freely produced in summer or autumn.

Juniperus communis 'Compressa'

No garden should be without it! The classic dwarf conifer, growing into a close candle-flame shape. The greyish-green foliage is tight and neat. May reach 1 metre tall after 30 years growth.

Salix x boydii

A natural hybrid found only once in Scotland. It forms a true miniature tree: in effect a bonsai without any special growing or training. It forms a proper smooth, gnarled trunk, and the leaves are greyish. Even small specimens give an impression of great age. Catkins are sometimes produced in May; they are silky and light yellow. Very slow-growing.



Sorbus reducta (non-suckering form)

A dwarf mountain ash. White flowers in spring and crimson berries in autumn. Lovely autumn leaf colour too. To about 40 cm. (There is a suckering form which may become an invasive pest; beware.)

