

Native Shrubs of the Midwest for the Home Landscape

A native plant is considered to be a species that existed in the Midwest prior to the arrival of European settlers, as opposed to a naturalized plant, which has been introduced into a new habitat by human influence. Native shrubs are part of the rich and complex relationships among plants, animals, insects, and microorganisms in natural ecosystems (woodlands, prairies, wetlands, etc.) of the Midwest. The diversity of native plants provides texture, color, shape, and interesting flowers and foliage. Planting native species is a way to re-establish natural diversity and restore our regional landscapes, and they help to sustain habitats for many of our native birds and insects.

Uses in the Landscape

- Create privacy or a sense of enclosure
- Define boundaries
- Screen unwanted views
- Provide seasonal interest with flowers, fruits, nuts, seedpods, fall color, color and texture on stem and bark, and form.
- Provide food and shelter for wildlife
- Promote biodiversity
- Provide a focal point in the landscape
- Create structure or "bones" in a mixed border
- Provide a backdrop against which other plants can be highlighted

Advantages of Native Shrubs

- When properly planted, native plants have the advantage of being adapted to Midwest growing conditions: they are vigorous and hardy, enabling them to survive cold winters and hot, dry summers
- Once established, native shrubs are more adapted to resist the negative effects of native insect and disease problems
- Using native shrubs in the landscape, or in combination with cultivated plants, enhances our natural surroundings

Factors to Consider

Ultimate size

A shrub is a woody plant that branches at its base and usually does not have a central leader. It is safe to say shrubs do not exceed 25 feet in height. If your site is limited by walkways, driveways, patios, and buildings, or by surrounding plantings, keep in mind the ultimate height and width of the plant you're selecting. A plant that outgrows its space will need to be severely pruned or removed, both of which can be difficult and expensive.

Maintenance

Native deciduous shrubs can offer seasonal interest with outstanding flowers, fruits, nuts, and seed pods. Choose wisely, however, because these attributes can also be messy, especially when planting near patios, walkways, entries, and driveways.

Most shrubs require only occasional pruning to keep them healthy and looking good. Pruning schedules are determined by whether the flower buds form on new wood (this year's growth) or old wood (last year's growth). A good annual maintenance schedule includes removing dead, damaged, or diseased wood. Occasional thinning of older canes promotes new vigorous wood and helps control the size of a plant. Always prune to enhance the natural shape of your shrub.

Availability

Native plants should not be removed from the wild but purchased from commercial nurseries. Collecting from the wild damages plant habitat and may deplete natural plant communities. Most retail nurseries and garden centers sell only plants that are familiar and popular, or ones that are easy to propagate in large quantities. Less familiar native plants are likely to be available only in smaller nurseries or those that specialize in native plants. If you have trouble locating a specific plant, contact The Morton Arboretum's Plant Clinic or Sterling Morton Library for catalog information.

The chart provides information about the size and other important characteristics of native shrubs recommended by The Morton Arboretum for their suitability and desirability in the Midwest. All shrubs listed are native to Illinois.

Native Shrubs of the Midwest for the Home Landscape

Large Deciduous Shrubs (over 8 feet)							
Botanical Name	Common Name	Height	Spread	Form	Rate	Zone	Cultural/Comments
<i>Amorpha fruticosa</i>	Indigo-Bush	6-15'	5-15'	Upright spreading	M	4-9	Sun; normally a plant of riverbanks and floodplains, but does well in poor, dry sites; large blue upright spiked flowers, persistent pods in winter; leggy habit should be cut to ground every few years; drought and salt tolerant; can become weedy though aggressive underground stems
<i>Aronia prunifolia</i> *	Purple Chokeberry	8-12'	8-10'	Upright suckering	S	4-7	Sun to shade; adaptable to dry or wet soils; white, flat-topped flowers in spring; blue-black fruit; wine-red fall color; found around marsh and bog edges
<i>Cephalanthus occidentalis</i>	Buttonbush	6-12'	12-18'	Upright arching	M	5-10	Sun to part shade; requires moist to wet soil; sensitive to drought and deep shade; late emerging glossy green leaves; fragrant, clusters of flowers in mid-summer; hard, 1-inch, ball-like fruit persistent throughout winter; use in naturalized wet areas
<i>Cornus amomum</i>	Silky Dogwood	6-10'	6-10'	Rounded	M/F	4-8	Sun to part shade; prefers moist to wet soil; upright, flat-topped flowers; gray-blue fruit valued by wildlife; reddish-purple stems showy in full sun; use in shrub borders, massing, and naturalizing
<i>Cornus racemosa</i>	Gray Dogwood	8-10'	10-15'	Erect, suckering	S	3-8	Sun or shade; tolerant of wet or dry soils; colony forming; good for dry open woods; white fruits attract birds; reddish-purple fall color

<i>Cornus stolonifera</i> (<i>C. sericea</i>)	Red-Osier Dogwood	7-9'	7-10'	Rounded, spreading	F	2-7	Sun; adaptable to soil extremes but prefers moist soils high in organic matter; reddish-purple fall color; attractive red stems in winter; many cultivars available
<i>Hamamelis virginiana</i>	Common Witch-Hazel	20-30'	15-20'	Rounded, spreading	M	3-8	Full sun to shade; prefers moist, well-drained soil; drought sensitive; large shrub to small tree found on dune slopes, ravines, and riverbanks; yellow ribbon-like flowers in mid-Oct., yellow fall color; good for naturalizing, massing, and borders
<i>Rhus glabra</i>	Smooth Sumac	10-15'	10-25'	Mounded, suckering	F	3-9	Full sun; tolerant of poor, dry soils; suckers freely to form open colonies; dark green foliage turns a brilliant orange-red-yellow fall color; use on slopes or for naturalizing
<i>Rhus typhina</i>	Staghorn Sumac	15-25'	15-20'	Mounded, suckering	F	4-8	Full sun; tolerant of dry conditions; velvety hairs on stems; attractive crimson fruit and orange to scarlet fall color; salt tolerant; good for screening or naturalizing
<i>Salix humilis</i>	Prairie Willow	6-12'	6-12'	Upright mounded	F	3-7	Sun; tolerant of many soil types from dry to wet; use for stabilizing stream banks and ponds; salt tolerant; yellow-brown to red stems attractive in winter landscape; prune occasionally to improve form
<i>Sambucus canadensis</i>	Common Elderberry	6-12'	6-12'	Upright arching	F	4-9	Sun to shade; does best in moist soils, but tolerant of dry conditions; suckers freely forming thickets; white flower clusters in July; purple-black fruit excellent food source for birds
<i>Staphylea trifolia</i>	American Bladdernut	10-15'	6-12'	Upright, suckering	M	4-8	Sun to shade; prefers moist, well-drained soil; wide spreading crown; unusual 3-lobed bladder-like fruit capsule; forms thickets; use for naturalizing
<i>Viburnum lentago</i>	Nannyberry Viburnum	15-20'	10-15'	Upright	M	3-7	Sun or shade; found as understory shrub or small tree of moist woods; often leggy; white, flat-topped flowers; good for naturalizing; susceptible to powdery mildew in shady conditions
<i>Viburnum prunifolium</i>	Blackhaw Viburnum	12-15'	8-12'	Rounded	S/M	3-9	Sun or shade; tolerant of dry soils; attractive horizontal branching; reddish-purple fall color; use as specimen, massing, and shrub border
<i>Viburnum trilobum</i>	American Cranberry-bush Viburnum	8-12'	8-12'	Upright to rounded	M	2-7	Sun to shade; prefers moist to well-drained soils; drought sensitive; found in thickets, swampy woods; showy lace-cap flowers; maple-like leaves turn reddish-purple in fall; edible red fruits provide a good food source for wildlife; good fruiting cultivars available

Intermediate-sized Deciduous Shrubs (5-8 feet)

<i>Aronia melanocarpa</i>	Black Chokeberry	3-5'	6-8'	Upright, suckering	M	3-8	Sun to shade; very tolerant of wet soils; black fruits; purplish-red fall color; best used in mass, forms large colonies
<i>Corylus americana</i>	American Hazelnut	6-8''	6-8'	Rounded, suckering	M-F	4-7	Sun to part shade; well-drained soil, pH adaptable; drought tolerant; long, bright yellow catkins in early spring; attractive orange-yellow fall color; colony forming shrub good for naturalizing
<i>Dirca palustris</i> *	Leatherwood	5-8'	4-8'	Rounded	S	4-9	Shade to part sun; thrives in cool, moist to wet soils high in organic matter; found in elevated flood plains; protect from wind; light green foliage one of the first to leaf out in spring; clear yellow fall color; spring plant only
<i>Ilex verticillata</i>	Winterberry	6-10'	6-10'	Upright	M	3-9	Sun to part shade; prefers moist to wet, acidic soil high in organic matter; drought sensitive; persistent, showy red fruits attract birds (requires male & female plant for fruit set); excellent for naturalizing, massing, and wet shrub border
<i>Lindera benzoin</i> *	Spicebush	6-12'	6-12'	Rounded	S/M	4-9	Part sun to part shade; found in the understory in moist woodlands; does best in moist, well-drained loamy soils; fragrant foliage turns golden yellow in fall
<i>Physocarpus opulifolius</i>	Common Ninebark	5-10'	6-10'	Upright spreading	M/F	3-6	Sun to part shade; pH adaptable; tolerant of dry conditions; white, flat-topped flowers in spring; bladder-like fruit clusters valued by birds; exfoliating stringy bark
<i>Symphoricarpos albus</i>	Snowberry	3-6'	3-6'	Mounded, suckering	F	3-7	Sun to shade; tolerant of dry to well-drained soils; blue-green foliage; snow white berry in autumn; use to stabilize slopes or in heavy shade conditions
<i>Viburnum acerifolium</i> *	Maple-leaved Arrowwood Viburnum	3-6'	4-5'	Upright spreading	M	4-8	Shade to part sun; understory shrub of well-drained to dry soils; maple-like foliage turns reddish-purple; white flat-topped flowers in spring; blue-black fruit valued by wildlife

Low-growing Deciduous Shrubs (under 5 feet)

<i>Amorpha canescens</i>	Leadplant	2-4'	4-5'	Rounded	M	2-6	Sun; does well in dry sandy to clay soil; attractive gray-green foliage adds nice contrast in rock gardens; purplish-blue flower spikes in June; occurs in native prairies
<i>Ceanothus americanus</i>	New Jersey Tea	3-4'	3-5'	Rounded	S/M	4-8	Sun to part shade; found in dry open woods, savannas, and rocky prairies; white flower spikes appear on new wood in June; shelter from wind; good on dry slopes

<i>Comptonia peregrina</i>	Sweet-fern	2-4'	4-8'	Erect spreading	S/M	2-5	Sun to part shade; prefers acidic, sandy to gravelly soil, but adaptable to poor, infertile soil; aggressively colony forming; aromatic, fern-like foliage; drought, salt, and heat resistant
<i>Diervilla lonicera</i>	Bush-Honeysuckle	3-5'	3-5'	Mounded, suckering	M	3-7	Sun to shade; well-drained, pH adaptable soil; drought tolerant; yellow flowers in July; excellent yellow-orange-red fall color
<i>Hydrangea arborescens</i>	Smooth Hydrangea	3-5'	5-8'	Rounded, suckering	F	3-9	Part shade to full sun with adequate moisture, but prefers well-drained soil; large, white, flat-topped flowers in June; prune to ground in spring
<i>Hypericum prolificum</i>	Shrubby St. John's Wort	2-5'	3-6'	Rounded	S	4-8	Sun to part shade; found in dry, rocky soils, pH adaptable; bright yellow flowers in June; persistent seed capsules valued by birds
<i>Potentilla fruticosa</i>	Shrubby Cinquefoil	1-4'	2-4'	Mounded	F	2-7	Sun; tolerant of poor, dry alkaline soils, but best in moist, well-drained sites; single, yellow flowers bloom throughout summer; very limited in its natural occurrence in northeast Illinois
<i>Rhus aromatica</i>	Fragrant Sumac	2-6'	6-10'	Mounded, suckering	S/M	3-9	Sun to part shade; prefers acidic, well-drained soil; tolerant of salt and dry conditions; fragrant foliage turns orange-red fall color; small, persistent wine-red berries attract birds
<i>Ribes americana</i>	Wild Black Currant	3-6'	3-6'	Mounded	M	3-5	Sun; moist to wet soils with organic matter; thornless shrub forming open colonies; aromatic leaves turn yellow to deep purple in fall; use in mass in wet areas
<i>Rosa carolina</i>	Pasture Rose, Carolina Rose	3-6'	6-10'	Erect, suckering	F	4-8	Sun; found in low wet stream edges to dry wood edges; prickly arching stems produce solitary, fragrant pink flowers in mid-summer; persistent red fruits valued by birds
<i>Rosa setigera</i>	Prairie Rose	3-4''	10-15''	Mounded, suckering	F	4-8	Sun; use in dry, open areas; wide-spreading, green to red arching stems; solitary pink flowers fade to white late in season; fall color often a combination of yellow, orange, pink red, then scarlet
<i>Spiraea alba</i>	Meadowsweet	3-6'	3-6'	Erect, suckering	F	3-7	Sun; tolerant of many soil conditions; grows in bogs to open pastures; tolerant of drought and heat; brown exfoliating stems; white flower spikes in summer; dry seed capsules persist into winter
<i>Symphoricarpos orbiculatus</i>	Coralberry	2-5'	4-8'	Upright arching	F	2-7	Sun to part shade; prefers well drained soils; found in floodplains, stream banks, and dry woods; coral-red berries persist into winter; valued by birds

* May be difficult to obtain in local garden centers

Height and spread are at the shrub's maturity. How fast a shrub will grow will be influenced by site conditions, species selection, and maintenance. The rate of growth refers to the average vertical increase of growth.

Key to Growth Rate:

F = Fast (12 inches per year)

M = Medium (6 to 12 inches per year)

S = Slow (less than 6 inches per year)

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