

Sustainable Landscaping – Choosing Native Plants

In a previous LRT article from 2018, I discussed the importance of expanding natural ecological corridors into your yard by planting native plants (woody and non-woody). Native wildlife has evolved with native plants so they are reliant on them for food, shelter, and rearing their young, which cannot typically be provided by non-natives. People often ask me what the best native plants are to use, but the choice involves many factors such as light, moisture, slope, and soil conditions. It is generally best to look at exactly what is native to our immediate region. Lake Ridge is near the border between the Coastal Plain that lies to the east and the Piedmont that lies to the west. I often look to our natural areas and try to mirror the species growing within them assuming the conditions are similar to your property. Some good sources of information on native plants within our region and where to purchase them can be found at the following sites:

- Native Plants for Northern Virginia, Plant NoVA Natives, www.plantnovanatives.org
- Native Plants for Wildlife Habitat and Conservation Landscaping Chesapeake Bay Watershed, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, <https://www.fws.gov/chesapeakebay/resources/native-plants.html>
- Virginia Native Plant Society, www.vnps.org
- Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation Natural Heritage, <https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/>

Soil type and soil compaction are also important factors to consider. Think of a healthy forest soil rich in organic matter (decaying leaves, twigs, branches, logs). This is what you typically want to recreate in the areas you plan to plant. Most suburban and urban yards have some level of soil compaction.

The amount of direct sunlight is another important consideration when selecting plants. Some plants will tolerate some level of shade. This is typical for many types of understory trees and plants within a forest. However, most tree species generally grow quicker when they receive more sunlight. Other species (generally early successional) must have full sunlight to thrive.

Does your yard have places where water drains that remain wet for longer periods of time (low or north facing slopes), while other areas are typically dry (such as a south or west facing hillsides). Both areas would require very different types of plants to create a successful landscape.

It is also important to consider our changing climate and what species of plants will perform well within our new normal where summers will typically be hotter and drier with less frequent moisture between rainfall events. This is an especially important factor to consider when selecting trees, since a properly selected and correctly planted tree can be anticipated to live for several decades.

The last major factor to consider is deer resistance and how to protect your native plants from deer. Most native plants are preferred by deer, but some species are more resistant to deer than

others. There are also many methods that can be used to deter deer, which I will have to save for a future article.

Here is a list of some of my favorite species of trees and shrubs native to our region, which I have found to perform well within our community. Please keep in mind that this is not an exhaustive list by any means.

Deciduous Shade Trees

- Swamp white oak, *Quercus bicolor*
- White oak, *Quercus alba*
- American elm, *Ulmus americana* --American elm has been devastated and dramatically reduced by Dutch elm disease introduced to this county in the 1950's. This is a very tough native tree, but a disease resistant cultivar would need to be provided such as 'Jefferson,' 'New Harmony,' or 'Valley Forge.'
- Blackgum, *Nyssa sylvatica*
- Hackberry, *Celtis occidentalis*
- Bitternut hickory, *Carya cordiformis*

Deciduous Understory Trees

- Sweetbay magnolia, *Magnolia virginiana*
- Eastern redbud, *Cercis canadensis*
- Pawpaw, *Asimina triloba* – produces edible fruit!
- Common persimmon, *Diospyros virginiana*
- Eastern hophornbeam, *Ostrya virginiana*

Small Evergreens

- American holly, *Ilex opaca*
- Eastern redcedar, *Juniperus virginiana*

Large Evergreens Shortleaf pine, *Pinus echinata*

- Longleaf pine, *Pinus palustris*
- Loblolly pine, *Pinus taeda*

Shrubs

- Southern arrowwood viburnum, *Viburnum dentatum*
- Maple leaf viburnum, *Viburnum acerifolium*
- Blackhaw viburnum, *Viburnum prunifolium*
- Northern or southern bayberry, *Morella cerifera* or *Morella pensylvanica*
- Mountain laurel, *Kalmia latifolia*
- American beautyberry, *Callicarpa americana*
- Red chokeberry, *Aronia arbutifolia*

- American hazelnut, *Corylus americana*
- Virginia sweetspire, *Itea virginica*
- Summersweet, *Clethra alnifolia*
- Ninebark, *Physocarpus opulifolius*
- American Strawberry Bush, *Euonymus americanus*
- Silky dogwood, *Cornus amomum*
- Witch hazel, *Hamamelis virginiana*
- Flame azalea, *Rhododendron calendulaceum*



American Beautyberry, *Callicarpa americana* (Photo by Nicholas Drunasky)



Sweetbay Magnolia, *Magnolia virginiana* (Photo by Nicholas Drunasky)



Virginia sweetspire, *Itea virginica* (Photo by Nicholas Drunasky)