

Hardy and Versatile—Native Shrubs and Small Trees

by Cindy Gilberg



Missouri is home to a long list of native shrubs and small trees, many of which are prime choices for our landscapes. According to Don Kurz (author of the field guide “Shrubs and Woody Vines of Missouri”), approximately 130 species of small to medium native woody shrubs can be found growing in our state. While this doesn’t include several of the small trees, some are species we might think of as small trees rather than as shrubs. There is a fine line distinguishing between small trees and shrubs—in general, trees have single trunks and are about 20 feet or more in height while shrubs have multiple stems. Of course, gardeners sometimes confuse the situation even more by encouraging multiple stems on small trees and by pruning shrubs into single-stem specimens.

As versatile as they are functional, this group of plants is an integral part of the overall landscape, adding medium-size, year-round structure. Between the canopy of large trees and the herbaceous plants that form the ground layer, shrubs and small trees provide the framework or backbone of the garden. In this way, they are useful in outlining the structure of a space. Many designers utilize them to create ‘rooms’ within a garden as well, providing enclosure and privacy.

Shrubs and small trees are quite valuable as screening and are an aesthetic alternative to fencing, especially when the fence is not tall enough to successfully block the view. Consider combining groups of different species with varying heights and textures for a more dynamic setting. Repetition of similar forms throughout the view creates rhythm and serves to tie the garden together visually. A few species that work well for screening are hazelnut (*Corylus americana*), black haw (*Viburnum prunifolium*), gray dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*), and ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*). These species are also outstanding choices for planting after invasive honeysuckle is removed, particularly when the invasive bush honeysuckle is functioning as a screen.

Smaller shrubs (three to five feet) can be planted in large masses to form tall ground cover, making a handsome backdrop for shorter herbaceous perennials. A classic look is to have small trees rising up out of these masses, using the ground cover shrubs as an anchor for the scene. A useful list for this situation includes fragrant sumac (*Rhus*

aromatica 'Grow Low'), beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*), wild hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*) and golden currant (*Ribes odoratum*).

All of these plants can be used as accents in the garden where textural contrast is needed or to punctuate a view. Leatherwood (*Dirca palustris*) is a lesser known beauty that is slow-growing, reaching an ultimate height of five to six feet. Vernal witch hazel (*Hamamelis vernalis*) blooms in late winter with dark-yellow flowers that are delightfully fragrant while common witch hazel (*H. virginiana*) blooms with lemon-yellow flowers in late fall. Both grow twelve to fifteen feet tall but give vernal witch hazel lots of space since it grows 15-20 feet wide as well. Both have desirable yellow-orange fall foliar color.

Remember that habitat for birds and other wildlife is best accomplished with a diversity of plants. Make note of when a plant flowers, attractive for both the gardener and pollinating insects. Many have berries, such as dogwoods, viburnums and spice bush (*Lindera benzoin*), providing additional interest in the garden as well as food for birds. Dense branching of shrubs and small trees also offers cover and potential nesting sites for many birds.

An excellent performer for woodland gardens is wild hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*). Large, flat clusters of white flowers lighten up the shade in beginning in June and last for much of the summer. It grows 3' – 4' and is tolerant of average soil. This hydrangea works well when planted in masses and is useful for naturalizing. Pruning, while not necessary, can be done in late winter to remove old flower stems and improve the overall appearance. Because of its large leaves hydrangea is perfect for planting with fine to medium textured plants such as ferns, sedges (*Carex sp.*), Indian pink (*Spigelia marilandica*) and black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*).

Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*) earns its name every September when its long branches are laden with clusters of brilliant fuchsia berries. By December the berries are almost gone, having provided a feast for many songbirds. This exceptional, 4' native shrub does quite well in full sun to light shade with an organic-rich soil and average moisture. Light blue flowers of aromatic aster blend well with the colorful berries. A mass of prairie dropseed as a foreground provides a delightful contrast in foliar texture.

I never cease to be amazed by the sheer numbers of butterflies and other insects that visit buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*) each year. In July, hundreds of round, creamy white flowers dangle from this 5'-7' shrub. Tolerant of drier soils but happiest in moist areas, buttonbush, is at the top of the list for rain gardens, at the edge of ponds and for use in low, wet landscapes. It performs best in full to part sun and can be used as a mass planting or singly as a specimen plant. Other wetland species such as copper iris (*Iris fulva*), orange coneflower (*Rudbeckia fulgida*) and swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata*) are wonderful companion plants to include in conjunction with buttonbush.

Another outstanding choice not only for moist soils but for attracting butterflies is spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*), a 2005 Plant of Merit. In early spring, its fragrant chartreuse flowers can be seen through the leafless woodlands. The aromatic leaves, appearing after

the flowers, are the larval food for the spicebush swallowtail butterfly. While spicebush is best suited for open woodlands (light or dappled shade) and moist soil, it tolerates full sun as long as the soil is quite moist. It is also tolerant of drier soil when planted in light shade. Growing 6' – 12', spicebush produces red berries (on female plants) that attract many birds.

On warm days in March, a most remarkable spicy scent tempts walkers in the Whitmire Wildflower Garden to discover its source. Down the path and around the corner they realize it comes from a large rounded shrub covered with millions of small, fragrant yellow flowers. It is clove current (*Ribes odoratum*), a 6' – 10', thornless shrub that has an arching habit. Clove currant is often planted as a screen or hedge because it tends to colonize. Birds come to eat its edible, black berries in mid to late summer.

Most gardeners know the classic 'top ten' that include dogwood, redbud, serviceberry, fringe tree and winterberry. Just a handful of other worthy options for the landscape are discussed here. The Native Plant School, held at Shaw Nature Reserve is a wonderful way to become familiar with a whole new palette of hardy native plants.

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