

My Favorite Shrubs for Plantings

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Over the years we have planted a number of shrubs in various reforestation, wildlife enhancement and stream restoration projects. Small growing, multi-stemmed shrubs have many desirable qualities in that they can be used in smaller growing spaces, provide dense cover for birds and other animals, create a transition zone between a high forest community and a field, do not encroach on agricultural crops like a large growing tree, produce berries and other fruits, and many have beautiful blooms that enhance the landscape.

Despite their many virtues, in my experience, shrubs are harder to establish than most trees. This probably has to do with the fact that they don't grow as fast as young trees or get as large so they are more prone to suffer losses from animals like deer, mice and voles, and weed competition. What seems to enhance survivorship is to enclose the shrub in a protective device like a tree shelter for a couple of years, then remove the shelter during the late spring to allow the shrub to attain its proper form. (The shrub will have a spindly shape in the shelter. After the shelter is removed judicious pruning may be in order to allow the shrub to support itself.) In addition I have noticed that some shrubs tend to grow faster and survive better than others. These have become my favorite shrubs. Here is one of my favorite shrubs with some of its characteristics and growth habits.

Eastern Elderberry

There are nearly 50 species of elderberry or elder found throughout the world. Elderberries (*Sambucus*) are found in every continent except for Africa and Australia. Most of the native elderberries found in Frederick County are *Sambucus canadensis* or Eastern Elderberry. Elderberries are found in stream bottoms and lowland areas that are moderately wet but not swampy. The elderberry bush can have multiple stems and grow to a height of 20' tall. Elderberry bushes can live for hundreds of years. Elderberries have lancelet leaves and a white flower that blooms in mid-June in Frederick County. A purple fruit develops in August. These fruits are very valuable food sources for many birds; and, a number of butterflies and moths feed on the leaves during their larval stage.

The fruit of elderberry is mildly poisonous when eaten raw but when cooked elderberries are used for pies, jams, tea, wine, and other liqueurs. The Scandinavians and Germans have a traditional elderberry soup.

Elderberry is a favorite shrub of mine for streamside “riparian” plantings because it is hardy, grows fast, and has many benefits for wildlife. And, let’s not forget its beautiful bloom!

Note: Other favorite shrubs that will be featured in future postings include Chokeberry, Crabapple, Eastern Red Cedar, Hazel Alder, Hazelnut, Common Ninebark, American Plum, Eastern Redbud, and Silky Dogwood. Another favorite, the arrowwood viburnum, was profiled in an article in Winter 2008.