

## Plants for Nature Gardens: Shrubs



Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*) is a native shrub, that can be found across central and Southern Ontario. Chokecherry provides berries for birds and winter twigs for larger mammals. Photo: MaryJane Proulx

Shrubs and bushes are an often-underappreciated aspect of a nature garden. Medium-sized shrubby plants add layers to gardens and create important habitat for nesting birds, as well as host plants for insects. When choosing shrubs, make sure the varieties you are looking at are native. Popular varieties like autumn olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata*), English yew (*Taxus baccata*) and non-native Asian/tatarian honeysuckles (*Lonicera*) are all considered invasive species that can out compete natives.

Introducing exotic plants into your gardens can have serious unintended consequences for nature. One of the best known aggressive

invading shrubs in Ontario is European buckthorn (*Rhamnus cathartica*), once a popular ornamental shrub. European buckthorn grows quickly to heights of 10 feet or more, choking out native plants and taking over forest understories as well as open meadows. This is only one of dozens of species of invasive woody shrub that are slowly taking over natural areas in Ontario because of human introduction.

To avoid introducing new invasive species, plant native! Native shrubs can be bought from nurseries and landscaping companies. Species in the genus *Viburnum*, such as nannyberry, downy arrowwood, hobblebush, highbush cranberry, and wild raisin, have beautiful white flowers that provide nectar sources for bees, moths, and hummingbirds, and larval hosts for butterflies such as the lucia azure. Other attractive shrubs that make great pollinator plants and bird nesting areas include dogwoods (*Cornus*) such as red-osier, alternate leaved, and silky dogwood, beaked hazelnut (*Corylus cornuta*), red elderberry (*Sambucus racemosa*), service berry (*Amelanchier*), staghorn sumac (*Acer pensylvanicum*) and striped maple (*Acer pensylvanicum*). Native honeysuckles such as bush honeysuckle (*Diervilla*) and America fly-honeysuckle (*Lonicera canadensis*) are great for moths and bumblebees and provide fragrant flowers.

A unique and easy way of collecting shrubs for your garden is to grow your plants from bear scat! If you spend any time within The Land Between during late July and August, you will undoubtedly run into the seed-filled leavings of a black bear. Bear scat at this time of year is filled with the seeds of species such as currants (*Ribes*), cranberries and blueberries (*Vaccinium*), chokecherries (*Prunus virginiana*), and raspberries (*Rubus*). With a little care, these seeds can be separated and planted in individual pots, then transplanted into your garden, for free! One good bear scat could potentially yield thousands of seedlings that would otherwise be unaffordable to most people. These seedlings can be used to fill in gaps between trees and to create hedges and thickets on the edges of your garden. And there's an added benefit: chokecherries make great jelly!

When we garden for nature, nature gardens for us. We all get to enjoy the benefits of a natural garden!



By Basil Conlin