Native Shrubs in Our Gardens

A Guide for the Willamette Valley

Native Gardening Awareness Program
A Committee of the Emerald Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Oregon

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This gardeners’ guide to the native shrubs of the Willamette Valley is designed to be a reference for home gardeners and landscape professionals and nurseries. In this publication we define natives as plants which were present in our local area at the time of European and American settlement. The Native Plant Society of Oregon (NPSO) advocates planting local material which has been derived from local sources. Many local plant nurseries are producing plants from our eco-region and adhere to responsible collection and propagation practices following NPSO policies and guidelines. (www.NPSOreg.org) This guide includes species found in the Willamette Valley and reaching up just into the foothills of the Cascades and Coast ranges.

We refer to native habitats and climatic conditions that we may find or imitate in our gardens. Identifying native plants in our landscapes and respecting their natural conditions teaches us to conserve natural areas. Natives can form the backbone of a constructed urban landscape and simulate characteristics of a natural landscape.

Planting native shrubs is a great first step in creating a native garden. Shrubs add substance, a variety of natural forms and year-round interest. Shrubs easily grow to become screens and many blend well in hedgerows. Planting shrubs in natural groupings reflects nature’s soft design and allows room for growth, expansion and even succession of plants. A few plants of snowberry, for example, can quickly become a thicket that binds soil, promotes water infiltration and gives a home to wildlife, as they give year round interest with dainty pink flowers from soft green rounded forms in the spring and bright white fruit on naked stems in the winter.

In this guide we have included plants which the average gardener will easily grow and are increasingly available locally. The Emerald chapter NPSO lists local native plant nurseries. (www.EmeraldNPSO.org) We have not recommended plants which are listed as rare or endangered, but occasionally mention them for educational reasons.
Red Twig Dogwood - *Cornus sericea* (C. stolonifera)

This shrub is a knockout in winter when its bare, glowing red stems color the landscape. Neatly paired oval leaves showcase open clusters of small white flowers that are followed in summer by white berries. In the fall, plants are clothed in glorious shades of pink and red leaves.

Red twig dogwood is very fast growing (up to 12 feet) and is effective as a dense screen without pruning. Cutting one third of the shrub to the ground every few years, removing the oldest growth, will renew the strong colors of vigorous young stems. Although this dogwood is found primarily in riparian areas in the wild, it will thrive on any but the hottest, driest sites.

Red twig dogwood is important source of winter food for deer and elk. Birds relish its berries.

Nootka Rose - *Rosa nutkana* var. *nutkana*,

Clustered Rose - *Rosa pisocarpa*

These fast growing native roses form mounds or thickets of upright or arching canes 5 to 8 feet tall and wide. Nootka rose has large solitary pink flowers, while clustered rose has a more abundant display of smaller pink blossoms. In nature, clustered rose is quite at home in sunny, wet spots. Nootka rose is usually seen around margins of wetlands, near streams, and in open woodlands. Both can be grown in a wide variety of locations, wet or dry, sunny or shady. In shade, plants will grow less vigorously and flower only sparingly. Blooms are followed in fall by attractive red rose hips.
Pacific Ninebark - *Physocarpus capitatus*

White, snowball-like flower clusters in May are followed by showy seed clusters fading from red to brown. During winter, ninebark shows off attractive, peeling, red-brown bark, the feature that inspired its common name. It grows at a moderate rate: 6 to 8 feet tall and as wide in sun or a 10- to 15-foot open shrub in shade. Although native to damp sites, it performs well on drier sites.

Birds are attracted to this shrub’s seeds for food and to its dense growth for cover.

Douglas Spiraea - *Spiraea douglasii*

Tall, pink-to-deep-rose flower plumes appear in June and last well into the summer after most native shrubs have finished blooming. All spiraeas have gorgeous fall foliage in shades from purple-pink to yellow-orange. Spiraea grows rapidly, at first growing upward to 4 to 6 feet, and later spreading into a broad thicket. It can be used as “instant landscape” plant and is effective as an erosion control plant on wet slopes or in shallow standing water. In the shade, growth is likely to be floppy and flowerless. Spiraea is tolerant of summer drought, although growth is slower on hot, dry sites. Like other species in the rose family, the leaves are prone to rust and powdery mildew, which can be avoided by improved air circulation and adequate soil moisture.

Twinberry - *Lonicera involucrata*

Twinberry is the only Willamette Valley shrub that flowers from spring through late summer. Pairs of yellow hummingbird-like flowers are followed by twin, jet black berries set attractively on large, red bracts. Birds relish the fruits. This honeysuckle relative grows extremely quickly to 8 to 10 feet in both sun
and light shade. Plants are semi-evergreen and take well to pruning, making them effective hedge plants. Twinberry tolerates wet soils as well as summer drought but will not thrive on the hottest, driest sites.

**Sitka Willow** - *Salix sitchensis*, **Hooker’s Willow** - *Salix hookeriana*

Sitka and Hooker’s willows are the native shrub willows you are most likely to encounter in the Willamette Valley. Sitka willow has elliptic leaves with silvery, velvet backsides and grows to 10 to 15 feet. Hooker’s willow is similar, but has little hair on the leaves. It generally grows to 15 feet tall and at least as wide. In winter, many willow species have bright yellow or red twigs. In early spring, their budding catkins are popular for flower arrangements.

Other local native shrubby willows include Geyer’s willow (*S. geyeriana*), Mackenzie willow (*S. prolixa*), dusky willow (*S. melanopsis*), coyote willow (*S. exigua*), and soft-leaved willow (*S. sessilifolia*), and all have similar cultivation requirements. These smaller species are more suitable for small gardens than is Hooker’s willow.

Willows should be planted in sun and grow best in wet soils. They will require summer irrigation if planted in dry places. Willows exhibit rapid growth, up to 3 to 6 feet per year, making them excellent as instant screening plants. Cut stems to the ground once every few years to control size and renew stem color.

Willows are important host plants for Willamette Valley native butterflies.

*Shrubby willows, such as Hooker’s willow, grow best in wet sites and adapt to seasonal flooding*
Red Flowering Currant - *Ribes sanguineum*

This native is very popular for its brilliant display of bright rose, white, pink or bi-colored flowers in March and April. In sun it will flower abundantly and grow rapidly to 8 feet. This currant is striking in partial shade where it is generally a more open shrub. Late summer brings interesting, speckled, light blue berries often consumed by birds. The plant requires good drainage and is drought tolerant, although will drop leaves early in a hot, dry summer. Red flowering currant is sometimes short-lived in cultivation. It can serve as an alternate host for rust disease.

Oceanspray - *Holodiscus discolor*

In June, this plant bears prolific, striking arches of lacy, creamy flower clusters resembling the spray of a breaking wave. Ocean spray is especially effective on steep clay or rocky slopes. It is lovely as part of a tall hedge or woodland margin. It has a moderate growth rate to 5 to 7 feet in sun and 8 to 12 feet in shade. It tolerates all but the very wettest soils but will not flower in full shade. This is a good host plant for the caterpillar stage of butterflies. The strong wood of ocean spray was used for construction pegs before the advent of nails.

Tall Oregon Grape - *Berberis (Mahonia) aquifolium*

Oregon grape is the state flower of Oregon. Its fragrant and bright yellow flowers in April are followed by attractive blue berries that are appreciated by birds. This glossy, spiny-leafed evergreen will grow in many sites, including sun or shade, wet or dry soil. Given
sufficient light and moisture, tall Oregon grape grows into 6 to 10 foot dense thickets with abundant flowers and fruit and can be an effective screen requiring little pruning. In shade, it tends to have a sparse and leggy form, but can be easily shaped through pruning. Oregon grape is drought tolerant once established. The yellow rhizomes by which this plant spreads were used for medicine and dye by Pacific Northwest Native Americans.

**Western Mock Orange** - *Philadelphus lewisii*

Arching branches covered with fragrant, single, white blossoms with prominent yellow centers in June make this an attractive native plant that can be a great part of a mixed hedgerow. Mock orange grows slowly to 8 to 12 feet and is easily pruned to a smaller size. If pruning is desired, cut old or weak branches after flowering. It is best located near a window, door, or walkway where its fragrance will be enjoyed but give it enough room for a spread of 10 or more feet. It thrives in sun or part shade but does not tolerate wet soils. Avoid regular summer watering, and in wet areas, plant it on a raised mound to increase drainage.

**Blackcap raspberry** - *Rubus leucodermis var. leucodermis*

One of our many species of native raspberries and blackberries, this is a fabulous food plant. It is found in the wild as a frequent inhabitant of fresh clear-cut and burns. Attractive, pale blue canes grow upright 3 to 6 feet in sun, but trail in shade.

The stems, covered with a white bloom, are strikingly ornamental in winter, giving cultivated forms names such as “ghost plant.” Blackcap is a fast-growing plant that is drought-tolerant and requires moderately drained soils. For berry production, it is best planted in sun with some summer water. The fruit ripens in July and August. Raspberry canes are biennial with the two-year-old canes producing fruit. Like conventional raspberry production, these canes can be removed after harvest and other canes pruned back.
Oval-Leaf Viburnum - *Viburnum ellipticum*

This under-appreciated native has scalloped leaves and flat topped clusters of creamy white flowers in May, followed by small red fruits loved by birds. In the fall, its foliage turns to beautiful shades of red and burgundy. The plants grow upright to 10 to 15 feet, making it useful as a background plant in a small landscape. In the Willamette Valley, oval-leaf viburnum is often found in thickets surrounding wetlands. It should succeed on a wide variety of sites - wet or dry, sunny or shaded. Keep in mind that it will have denser growth and more abundant flowers in sun and that it will lose its leaves earlier in drought.

Coyote Brush - *Baccharis pilularis*

Baccharis, or coyote brush, is an evergreen shrub found from the coast to the Willamette Valley and occasionally as far east as the foothills of the Cascades. It is one of the few native evergreen shrubs for our area. The small, silvery-green leaves of coyote brush brighten the winter landscape. The male and female flowers are on separate plants. The tiny flowers are not showy, and the female plants produce feathery seeds that are rather messy. Most nursery stock is grown from cuttings from male plants.

Coyote brush tolerates a wide range of conditions, growing on sand or clay, nearly swampy to well-drained soils, and in moist-cool or hot-dry settings. Plant it in the open and maintain its shape by pruning out longer branches before spring. A dwarf form of coyote brush is popular and highly valued in California. Local growers are just beginning to cultivate baccharis, which should prove to be quite popular in Oregon.

Redstem Ceanothus - *Ceanothus sanguineus*

Redstem ceanothus has toothed, green leaves that drop in fall to expose dark purple stems. White flower sprays appear in June. Growth is rapid, to 10 to 15 feet. This plant is notable as a host plant for butterfly caterpillars and for its ability to fix nitrogen. Unfortunately it is both hard to cultivate in the garden and hard to find in
the nursery trade. However, we encourage you to try it due to its importance in our native ecosystem. For best results, plant it in full to partial sun in soil with excellent drainage and minimal summer water.

A pearly white spray stands above the toothed leaves of red-stem ceanothus
Shady Situations

Natives that perform well in shade

Osoberry - Oemleria cerasiformis

This plant gives a special show long before other native shrub species awake from winter’s slumber. It unfurls large soft green foliage in late February and shows its delicate chains of greenish white bellflowers throughout March. The male and female flowers are borne on separate plants. The fruit formed from the fertilized female flowers begin to ripen in bright shades of orange, which then turn dark blue. The thin-fleshed fruit is devoured by birds who distribute the hard drupe seeds. Tall sprouts grow quickly into a narrowly upright shrub 8 to 15 feet tall. Stems become stout with age and clumps spread with new shoots. Osoberry looses its thin and smooth leaves early as they turn yellow and drop near the end of summer.

California Hazelnut - Corylus cornuta var. californica

To the untrained eye this native hazelnut (or filbert) looks identical to the common, weedy, cultivated European filbert. However, drooping catkins of the native shrub elongate and turn creamy yellow 1 to 2 months later than the European filbert. Also, the nuts of the native are completely enclosed in a tubular husk, whereas the European filbert’s husk is open, flared, and only partly covering the nut. California hazel grows slowly into a dense 8- to 15-foot shrub. Although the filbert is found in cool shade and on woodland edges, it grows well in sunny, hot locations. It requires well-drained soil. In autumn, California hazelnut carries bright yellow foliage and small, tasty nuts, generally harvested by squirrels and jays before they are completely ripe.
Snowberry - *Symphoricarpos albus*

Snowberry has soft green leaves with rounded or lobed, and sometimes toothed margins, growing quickly into a small rounded shrub of 3 to 5 feet. The dainty, pink, bell-shaped flowers of May and June develop into round white berries that persist through winter on bare, fine-textured twigs and provide food for birds and bright accents in a muted winter landscape. Snowberry will grow into gentle masses, spreading quickly through its dense roots and by generating new seedlings at the edges. It is an effective erosion control plant and mixes well with other native plants in hedgerows. Snowberry is found on woodland edges, in the open, and on riparian sites, tolerating a variety of conditions, sun to shade and drought to wet. On sunny sites with adequate summer moisture, the fruits will form into thick, marble-size balls in dense clusters. Another occasional Willamette Valley species of snowberry, *S. mollis*, is smaller in stature, growing only up to 3 feet with a trailing habit.

Baldhip Rose - *Rosa gymnocarpa*

The small pink flowers of the baldhip rose bloom in May and are followed in fall by bright red fruits. It is named “baldhip rose” because it lacks the leaf-like large sepals that cup the base of the fruits of other rose species. The stems often have a fuzzy appearance due to the dense, straight, soft perpendicular prickles. This rose is primarily a plant of coniferous forests but is also found in the open. It varies in size and habit, growing 2 to 4 feet tall as an open and airy shrub in the shade or 5 to 6 feet tall as a densely robust shrub in the sun. Once established, it will gradually spread into a thicket.

The small flowers are fewer but more outstanding on a shade-grown plant. Baldhip rose is drought-tolerant and requires well-drained soil.

Red Elderberry - *Sambucus racemosa var. arborescens*

Red elderberry is a fast growing tree-like shrub notable for hollow pithy stalks, bold foliage, and pyramidal clusters of white
flowers. The showy, red fruits that follow are eagerly sought by birds in June. In the shade, it grows to an open, multi-stemmed, small tree, up to 15 feet tall, but in the sun, it forms a more compact and smaller shape. Red elderberry is especially useful as an instant, bold specimen plant. It can be short-lived in the heat of the valley and may require supplemental summer water, especially in sunny exposures. It is occasionally difficult to cultivate but is definitely worth a try. Plant red elderberry in moderately drained soil.

**Thimbleberry** - *Rubus parviflorus*

Large, soft, fuzzy, maple-shaped leaves and attractive, tasty, red berries make this deciduous, thorn-less raspberry-relative an excellent texture plant as well as a choice edible. Loose clusters of fast growing 3- to 6-foot canes create open stands. It grows well in shade or partial shade and in full sun with plenty of water. Thimbleberry may spread into a very large thicket but can be controlled by digging out root runners. The best fruit production occurs in stands planted in partial shade such as the east side of a building or fence.

**Salal** - *Gaultheria shallon*

Salal is a native shrub that is best known for its large, smooth, glossy, leathery evergreen leaves and contrasting red stems, which make it popular in the florist trade. Arching branches bear long-lived, bell-shaped, pink and white flowers that are followed by edible blue berries. Salal forms dense stands up to 3 feet tall. It is slow to establish and requires summer water for the first 2 to 4 years. Salal thrives in deep layers of organic matter, such as leaf or bark mulch. It is prone to suffer from leaf spot in cultivation. Salal is best planted on edges of woodlands.
and allowed to spread into the sunnier sites as it gets established. In sun, it will produce more abundant flowers and fruit. It requires little maintenance once established and will grow into a wonderful evergreen thicket. It is an ideal plant to replace English ivy.

**Dwarf Oregon Grape - *Berberis nervosa***

Dwarf Oregon grape is another native shrub that has evergreen leaflets, nine to 19, on a full leaf stem spreading in handsome starbursts from stiff branches. In early spring, it produces sweet-smelling, bright yellow flowers. The dwarf Oregon grape is found in a similar niche in nature to sword fern. It spreads to a mass of plants in the lower layer of a woodland landscape about 3 feet tall, and like sword fern, the dwarf Oregon grape will tolerate sun and summer drought once established. The leaves retain their spring hues of purplish red when planted in sunny sites and in a shady planting will keep a deep mat green growth requiring some summer water.

**Vine Maple - *Acer circinatum***

Our native vine maple is commonly cultivated and is well-known for its elegant red to green stems, delicate fan-like leaves, and brilliant fall color. In the sun its fall foliage turns a bright red, and in the shade, a bright yellow. It is one of the few colorful native trees in the Willamette valley.

In the heat of the valley, it performs best in partial shade, where it becomes an 8- to 20- foot tall and equally wide small tree or broad shrub with a horizontal branching. In sun, it will grow into denser, upright, 8- to 15- foot, multi-stemmed tree. It is somewhat slow growing and is susceptible to drought and heat damage in sun, especially if its base is not shaded. Vine maple requires regular summer water until fully established and occasional summer water thereafter except in cool, shady locations. It is not tolerant of poorly drained soils.

**Snowbrush - *Ceanothus velutinus***

A fragrant froth of tiny, white flowers covers snowbrush’s shiny, evergreen leaves in summer, giving rise to its common name. The
leathery, 2- to 4-inch leaves have three prominent veins and are often sticky on top and leather-colored and velvety below.

Snowbrush requires a sunny location and can adapt to very dry or moist situations. A many-branched, frequently thicket-forming plant growing 5 to 9 feet tall, snowbrush would make an effective screen, where it would be attractive to the California tortoiseshell and pale swallowtail butterflies.

Snowbrush is a pioneer species, germinating after fires when competing shade plants have been removed. Like other ceanothus species, snowbrush fixes nitrogen, giving it an early advantage over other plants and enriching the soil for future plant communities.

**Oregon Boxwood - *Paxistima myrsinites***

Oregon boxwood is a small, dense, evergreen that grows relatively slowly to about 3 feet in height. Its lustrous, leathery, inch-long leaves are sharply toothed and lightly rolled under at the edges. Tiny, four-petal, ruby flowers bloom at the base of its leaves in late spring.

This tidy evergreen will be a welcome addition as a low border, an edging plant, or a fine-scaled evergreen accent in moderately dense to open shade. Oregon boxwood responds well to pruning, should one desire a native topiary in the garden!

**Red Huckleberry - *Vaccinium parvifolium***

Red huckleberry is widely spread on forest slopes west of the Cascade crest. The horizontally spreading branches remain green after leaves drop in the autumn. Happy in dry to moist and open to dense sites, red huckleberry is often found growing in rotting wood, peeking out from under the canopy of fir trees, or growing alongside rhododendrons. The small greenish-white, urn-shaped flowers are typical of the heath family. At least a dozen species of birds feed off its bright red berries and distribute the small seeds.

Another Oregon huckleberry, *Vaccinium ovatum*, is becoming popular in native plant gardens. It is native to the coastal forests near the ocean, and has sharply toothed, leathery evergreen leaves. Its small, pink, dangling flowers become small, black edible berries. Its showy new growth is an attractive reddish amber. Inland gardeners should plant evergreen huckleberry in the shade.
The Emerald Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Oregon, the Friends of Hendricks Park, the Native Plant Garden of Hendricks Park, and the City of Eugene Parks and Open Space Division supported the design and printing of this booklet.

Dedicated to the enjoyment, conservation, and study of Oregon’s native plants and habitats.
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