

Skip the Skip Laurel, Say No to Nandina: Choose Native

BY JOANNA BRICHETTO, SIDEWALKNATURE



Black chokeberry and Mockingbird
(Photo by Richard Hitt)

If your exotic evergreens are now “ever-brown” from the recent freeze, this is an ideal time to upgrade to natives. It doesn’t make sense to simply plant more of the same: the same non-native foundation shrubs that are anything but foundational to our ecosystem. Laurel, boxwood, nandina, Chinese holly, euonymus, false cypress, red-tips, Japanese cedar, and so forth: plants that evolved with creatures and conditions on different continents. What we need in Tennessee are more shrubs that evolved nearby. Native shrubs can be more likely to survive extreme weather, year-round. And most importantly, natives are the only sustainable choice: they contribute to local foodwebs in countless, critical ways that non-native plants cannot.

But, which native shrubs give us the color, texture, and size we want, while giving birds, bees, and butterflies what they need?

How To Choose:

No new plant is exempt from the old rule, “right plant, right place.” We must take into account a site’s soil, sun, moisture, and exposure to give new shrubs a chance to fulfill their potential.

To find out what a particular species or particular cultivar needs, check with an authority like the Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center (<https://www.wildflower.org/>).

A note on cultivars: a cultivar is a cultivated variety (of a species) selected for desired traits. On nursery tags, the cultivar is noted after the species name and will always be in single quotes, like ‘Gro-Low.’ Many cultivars of native shrubs offer a more compact size (height, spread, and shape) than the straight species. If size is the only characteristic changed, there will likely be no reduction in habitat benefits. But a cultivar with a color change of leaf or bloom may not benefit as many creatures.

Where To Buy:

Where to buy these “right” plants? Any big-box store sells exotic shrubs, but natives are harder to find. It may be worthwhile to phone a nursery first, and ask for specific plants while explaining your native goal. Inquiries like this can help managers gauge demand, and grow their inventory of natives. Local nurseries such as Bates Nursery on Whites Creek Pike, and Moore & Moore Garden Center have recently added more natives to meet the growing demand. Nashville’s big, native nursery is GroWild, in Fairview, open by appointment. GroWild and Bates both keep online lists of inventory. Also, look for seasonal native plant sales from groups like the Middle Tennessee Chapter of Wild Ones, and Friends of Cedars of Lebanon State Park.

Mail order: be aware that plants from nurseries in faraway states are products of that local climate and genetics, and may not perform as well as expected here.

What To Buy:

Below is a crowd-sourced list of native shrubs proven to do well in Middle Tennessee. All have ornamental appeal as well as habitat benefit.

EVERGREEN SHRUBS:

American holly / *Ilex opaca*
(including ‘Maryland Spreader’)
Yaupon holly / *Ilex vomitoria*
Eastern Red-Cedar / *Juniperus virginiana*
(including ‘Grey Owl’ and ‘Royo’)
Shrubby St. John’s-wort / *Hypericum prolificum*
Inkberry / *Ilex glabra*
Anise shrub / *Illicium floridanum* and
I. parviflorum
Coast doghobble / *Leucothoe axillaris*
Florida hobblebush / *Agarista populifolia*
Southern wax myrtle / *Myrica cerifera*

DECIDUOUS SHRUBS:

Black chokeberry / *Aronia melanocarpa*
American beautyberry / *Callicarpa americana*
Summersweet / *Clethra spp.*
Oakleaf hydrangea / *Hydrangea quercifolia*
Smooth hydrangea / *Hydrangea arborescens*
Silverleaf hydrangea / *Hydrangea radiata*
Winterberry / *Ilex verticillata*
Virginia sweetspire / *Itea virginica*
Arrowwood viburnum / *Viburnum dentatum*
Fragrant sumac / *Rhus aromatica* ‘Gro-Low’
Witch hazel / *Virginia (Hamamelis virginiana)*
and Ozark (*H. vernalis*)



Virginia Witch hazel
(Photo by Gail Eichelberger @ ClayandLimestone.com)



Beautyberry
(Photo by Joanna Brichetto)



Hydrangea arborescens ‘White Dome’ with
Brown-belted bumblebee (Photo by Richard Hitt)

Why To Buy:

Every native plant we add to our yards adds habitat to our neighborhood, our watershed, our planet. Even a plant in a pot on a porch can make a difference.

So, when buying a new shrub, skip the Skip Laurels, box the boxwood, fire the photinia, burn the burning bush, say no to Nandina, and just choose native.

Joanna Brichetto is a naturalist and writer in Nashville, and a member of the Middle Tennessee Chapter of Wild Ones (a native plant landscaping nonprofit), and of the Tennessee Native Plant Society.

RESOURCE:
“Why Native Plants Matter” (from the Audubon Society)
(<https://www.audubon.org/content/why-native-plants-matter#:~:text=Native%20plants%20provide%20nectar%20for,for%20all%20forms%20of%20wildlife.>)

Ladybird Johnson Wildflower Center native plant database (<https://www.wildflower.org/plants-main>)