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# Selecting Landscape Plants: Deciduous Shrubs

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Deciduous shrubs (those that lose their leaves in fall) give seasonal color and texture change to the landscape. The flowers, foliage, fruit, and bark provide color and landscape interest. A properly selected group of shrubs gives interest to the landscape throughout the year.

Deciduous shrubs usually tolerate difficult growing conditions better than most other landscape plants. Many grow rapidly and may require annual pruning, which is done just after the shrubs flower, regardless of time of year. Cutting older, heavier shoots back to ground level is one accepted practice, especially if the plant is overgrown. One fourth to one third of the stems should be removed each year.

Many deciduous shrubs have few serious insect or disease problems. Aphids or mites are occasional problems, but they are relatively easy to control.

Many deciduous shrubs are sold bare root while some must be balled and burlapped or container-grown to be successfully transplanted. Bare root plants are usually planted in the spring before growth starts. Balled and burlapped and container shrubs may be planted virtually any time except when the ground is frozen.

## Recommended Deciduous Shrubs

So many deciduous shrubs can be grown in Virginia that describing all of them is impractical. The species and varieties described in the following section are hardy statewide and the most commonly grown. The expected maximum height and width of each shrub are listed. Virginia includes zones 5 to 8, and most of these shrubs should perform well throughout the state

### Japanese Beautyberry *Callicarpa japonica*

This small shrub has fairly inconspicuous flowers with uniquely colored purple fruit, borne on the tips of the current season's growth and remaining on the plant a few weeks after the leaves have fallen. Heavy pruning in early spring will force vigorous growth that results in profuse fruit production. Unfortunately, this shrub has little ornamental value except for the colorful berries. A related species with bright-magenta fruit grows native in Virginia. (4 to 10 ft. height; 4 to 6 ft. spread).

### Witchhazels

These large shrubs or small trees have an attractive open habit and smooth, gray bark. The flowers range from clear yellow to a vibrant orange-red. The strap-like petals emerge in late winter for most witchhazels, although the native species (*Hamamelis virginiana*) blooms in fall. The roundish, somewhat leathery leaves turn a striking yellow or yellow-orange in fall. Numerous cultivars (varying primarily in size and flower color) are available of Chinese witchhazel (*Hamamelis mollis*), Vernal witchhazel (*Hamamelis vernalis*), Japanese witchhazel (*Hamamelis japonica*), and a hybrid group (*Hamamelis x intermedia*). Witchhazels are excellent shrubs for moist, somewhat acid soils. They tolerate full sun or part shade and do not have serious problems. (6 to 10 ft. height; larger spread).

### *Hamamelis* spp.

### Beautybush

A tall, vigorous, upright shrub with an arching, branching habit, the plant is covered with pink flowers in May. The brown, bristly seeds of beautybush are also interesting. This shrub is easy to grow and requires little attention if it is given enough room to develop. (6 to 15 ft. height; 4 to 8 ft. spread).

### *Kolkwitzia amabilis*

### Red Chokeberry

A dependable shrub on almost any soil, it produces small white to reddish flowers in late May. Chokeberry is planted primarily for the bright-red berries that are produced in late summer. There is also a black and purple-fruited species available, but it is not as attractive as the red one. (6 to 10 ft. height; 3 to 5 ft. spread).

### *Aronia arbutifolia*

### Dwarf Flowering Almond *Prunus glandulosa*

Flowering almond is a small, delicate shrub. Its branches are covered with small flowers in early May. The flowers may be pink or white, single or double. This shrub is a fine specimen and makes a nice accent plant in a foundation plantings. (4 to 5 foot height; 3 to 4 foot spread).

### Purpleleaf Sand Cherry *Prunus x cistena*

This small shrub is valued for its purple-colored foliage, which persists throughout the growing season. It produces small, pinkish flowers in May and small, colorful cherries in fall. (7 to 10 foot height; 5 to 8 foot spread).

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### **Spreading Cotoneaster** *Cotoneaster divaricatus*

An interesting plant, spreading cotoneaster has an upright growth habit and arching, spreading branches. Red berries cover the branches during early fall adding considerable interest to the landscape. Cotoneaster is susceptible to fireblight disease and is occasionally attacked by spider mites. It may have difficulty during hot Tidewater summers. (5 to 6 ft. height; 6 to 8 ft. spread).

### **Common Crape-Myrtle** *Lagerstroemia indica*

The height a crape-myrtle will attain generally increases in southern and eastern Virginia. The plant is grown for its large, showy flowers produced in summer. Numerous flower colors ranging from white through pink to a dark red are available, as are new dwarf cultivars and cultivars more resistant to powdery mildew. Crape-myrtle may die or freeze to the ground if grown in northern and western Virginia, although more cold tolerant cultivars are becoming available.

Crape-myrtle is somewhat difficult to transplant and must have a ball of earth around the roots or be container-grown. Some winter protection may be needed in parts of the state. Severely injured plants may fail to bloom even though new growth re-establishes the plant. Very heat and drought tolerant. (15 to 25 ft. height; 10 to 20 ft. spread).

### **Slender Deutzia** *Deutzia gracilis*

Deutzias are a group of shrubs grown for the showy, white or pinkish flowers produced in May. Slender deutzia is desirable because of its small size and slender, graceful, arching growth habit. (2 to 6 ft. height; 3 to 4 ft. spread).

### **Redosier Dogwood** *Cornus sericea (stolonifera)*

Redosier is a shrub-type dogwood adaptable to most soils although it does best in moist situations. It spreads by underground stems and increases in diameter as new stems arise from the ground. It does not have interesting flowers or fruit but is grown primarily for its colorful stems. Both red-stemmed and yellow-stemmed varieties are available. A dwarf cultivar, 'Kelseyi,' seldom grows over 2 feet high and is useful as a ground cover in large areas. (7 to 9 ft. height; 10 to 12 ft. spread).

### **Border Forsythia** *Forsythia x intermedia*

The profuse, yellow flowers of forsythia are considered by many people to be the first sure sign of spring. They are easily grown on almost any soil but prefer full sun. There are many cultivars of forsythia available, including some dwarf forms. (8 to 10 ft. height; 10 to 12 ft. spread).

### **Hydrangea/ Hills Of Snow** *Hydrangea arborescens 'Grandiflora'*

This hydrangea is a small shrub that produces large, white flower clusters almost 6 inches in diameter. It is frequently killed back to the ground in winter, but it grows rapidly and the cold does not interfere with the flowers. Hydrangea does not require any special soil but prefers a sunny location for best flower production. (3 to 5 ft. height; 3 to 6 ft. spread).

### **Oakleaf Hydrangea** *Hydrangea quercifolia*

This is a spreading shrub with large white flower panicles that turn buff-colored later in the season. The coarse stems have attractive, exfoliating bark. Large, oak-shaped leaves turn purple in fall. This shrub does best with some shade and must be grown in acid soil. An excellent shrub with four-season interest; it will colonize a large area if conditions are right. (4 to 6 ft. height; equal or greater spread).

### **Common Lilac** *Syringa vulgaris*

Lilac is one of the best known and most commonly planted of all the flowering shrubs. It is grown primarily for its spring flowers. Of the hundreds of varieties of lilacs that have been named, the so-called French hybrids are among the most popular. They are dense, upright shrubs that can be grown almost anywhere. Lilac flowers range in color from white to pink, lilac, bluish or purple. Both single- and double-flowered forms are commonly available. The flowers of most varieties are very fragrant.

Proper pruning is necessary to keep the plants attractive and to promote heavy flower production. After the plant becomes established, about one third of the old stems should be removed each year. Older lilac stems may be attacked by borers, and powdery mildew is a common summer disease. Proper pruning helps to minimize this problem. (8 to 12 ft. height; 6 to 15 ft. spread).

### **Persian Lilac** *Syringa x ersica*

Persian lilac is smaller in every respect than common lilac. When properly grown, its branches may be covered with flowers. It flowers at about the same time as common lilac. This lilac is more tolerant of Tidewater heat than common lilac. (4 to 10 ft. height; 5 to 10 ft. spread).

### **Sweet Mockorange** *Philadelphus coronarius*

Mockorange is a vigorous, upright shrub grown primarily for its white flowers which are borne in late spring. There are many varieties of mockorange from which to choose. Some varieties produce very fragrant flowers while others are not fragrant. Both single- and double-flowered varieties are available, and flower size varies from  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch to almost  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches in diameter. Some varieties never get over 4 feet in height while others may grow to 12 feet.

Mockorange has no serious insect or disease problems. Removal of a few older stems from the base each year will keep the plants vigorous and flowering. They have little ornamental value other than their flowers. (4 to 12 ft. height; equal spread).

### **Pussy Willow** *Salix spp.*

Pussy willows are grown for their interesting and attractive catkins (flowers). The sexes in willow are separate with the male having large, gray, fluffy catkins with bright-yellow stamens. The female flower is not as attractive.

The catkins on pussy willow appear in very early spring. It is an easily transplanted, vigorous shrub well-adjusted to moist areas. However, it has many problems and needs to be kept vigorously growing to look attractive. Pussy willow has been overplanted in many areas. (Rosegold Pussy Willow (*Salix gracilistyla*) 6 to 10 ft. height, 6 to 10 ft. spread; Goat Willow (*Salix caprea*) 15 to 25 ft. height, 12 to 15 ft. spread; Black

Pussy Willow (*Salix* 'Melanostachys') 6 to 10 ft. height, 6 to 10 ft. spread; Purpleosier Willow (*Salix purpurea*) 8 to 10 ft. height, 6 to 8 ft. spread).

### **Flowering Quince** *Chaenomeles speciosa*

Quince shrubs usually have deep-red flowers, although new varieties with white, pink, and various shades of red flower colors are now available. Quince flowers very early in the spring along with forsythias and spireas. Lustrous, green foliage appears soon after the flowers have opened. The large, yellow-green, apple-like fruits are not particularly attractive but can be used to make jellies. The Japanese quince (*C. japonica*), a smaller plant only 3 feet high, is similar to flowering quince. (6 to 10 ft. height; 6 to 12 ft. spread).

### **Rose-Of-Sharon** *Hibiscus syriacus*

A large shrub, Rose-of-Sharon flowers in July and August, a time when few other shrubs are in bloom. Flowers may be single or double and range in color from white to pink, red, or blue, with all the variations in between. Unless the older portions of the plant are pruned out regularly, the flowers will become smaller. If handled properly, the plant is bushy enough to be used as a hedge or screen. (6 to 12 ft. height; 6 to 10 ft. spread).

### **Smokebush** *Cotinus coggygria*

The plumose, fruiting panicles of smokebush are attractive for several weeks in summer. The foliage is blue-green throughout the growing season. This shrub is often used as an accent point in the landscape because of the showy panicles. The yellow to orange autumn color is also attractive. Smokebush will grow in any soil and any location in the garden. Insects and disease are of little concern. The cultivar 'Purpureus' has purple leaves and fruiting panicles that are much showier than the species. (15 ft. height).

### **Spiraea** *Spiraea* spp.

Spiraeas are as easy to grow as any group of flowering shrubs. They adapt to a wide range of soil types. A good deal of sunshine is required for flowering, but they will grow in moderate shade. Most spiraeas have white flowers, but there are a few with pink or red flowers. They range in height from 1½ to 7 feet. Vanhoutte spiraea is the most well known, and still popular because of its heavy set of white flowers and graceful, arching growth habit. Bridalwreath spiraea is attractive with its double white flowers, lustrous green foliage, and orange fall color. 'Anthony Waterer' is the most popular small spiraea, around 2 feet high. The deep pink flowers of this species are borne in large 5 to 6 inch clusters. Many new, white-flowered, dwarf cultivars (especially of *S. japonica*) are being used as foundation plants. Spiraeas are relatively free of insect or disease pests. Occasionally a heavy spring infestation of aphids will occur. (1½ to 12 foot height; equal spread).

### **Staghorn Sumac** *Rhus typhina*

Sumacs are easily grown shrubs that do particularly well in dry soil. The staghorn sumac can eventually become a rather large shrub, perhaps 35 feet high; however, as a multiple-stemmed plant, it seldom reaches that height. There are plants with male flowers only, female flowers only, or plants with both male and female flowers. Female flowers develop into bright-red fruit spikelets in fall and are quite interesting. The brilliant, red fall

color of sumac foliage is outstanding. Staghorn sumac has fuzzy twigs from which it derived its common name. The plant can be used as a mass planting, but in modern landscapes it is often used as a specimen because of its interesting growth habit. An attractive, cutleaf cultivar is available. Sumacs have no serious insect or disease problems. Though related to poison ivy, it is not a poisonous plant. (15 to 25 ft. height; 15 to 30 ft. spread).

### **Viburnums** *Viburnum* spp.

As a group of shrubs, viburnums have much to offer. In spite of their almost unlimited possibilities, they are infrequently used in most landscapes. They have beautiful spring flowers, attractive summer foliage, excellent fall color, and attractive bright-colored fruits in fall and winter. The fruits may be red, yellow, blue, or black and in a given species may change color several times as they mature. In some species the flowers are quite fragrant, adding materially to their value as ornamental plants. Viburnums are usually sold balled and burlapped or in containers. (2 to 30 ft. height; equal spread).

#### **Koreanspice Viburnum** (*V. carlesii*)

A small shrub growing to 5 feet. The flower buds are pink, opening to white flowers that are quite fragrant. It is susceptible to a graft disease

#### **Arrowwood Viburnum** (*V. dentatum*)

A large shrub, 6 to 16 feet. Will grow in sun or shade and is adaptable to any soil. Arrowwood is a rapid grower with good, glossy, red fall color.

#### **Wayfaringtree Viburnum** (*V. lantana*)

Another large shrub, 10 to 15 feet, that is especially good in dry-soil situations. The fall color is a good red; fruit changes from red to black and provides a source of food for birds.

#### **Blackhaw Viburnum** (*V. prunifolium*)

A large shrub, 12 to 15 feet in height, that can grow 20 to 30 feet high. During May this shrub is covered with white flowers in flat clusters, later followed by blue-black berries that are among the largest fruits in the viburnums. Blackhaw has an excellent, shiny red fall color.

#### **Double Viburnum** (*V. plicatum*)

This is a medium-sized shrub, up to 9 feet high. During May this plant has creamy-white flowers borne in flat clusters followed by bright-red berries in fall. The fall color is a dull red, but not outstanding. The plant's most interesting features are its horizontal branching and wide-spreading growth habit. This interesting form gives the plant added interest in the landscape. Other important landscape viburnums include Burkwood viburnum (*V. x burkwoodii* and cultivars) and American cranberry bush viburnum (*V. trilobum*).

#### **Weigela** (*Weigela florida*)

Most of the weigelas available in the nursery trade are hybrids developed to produce superior flowers. The funnel-shaped flowers are borne in clusters of three to five. They range in color from white to deep red. The stems are usually covered with flowers for a short period of time in the spring. Weigela is easy to grow and has no serious insect or disease problems. (6 to 9 ft. height; 9 to 12 ft. spread).



**Winterberry** (*Ilex verticillata*)

Winterberry is grown primarily for its bright-red berries that appear while the leaves are still green and remain on the plant long after the leaves have fallen. The inconspicuous flowers are borne on separate plants; some plants have all male flowers and others have all female flowers. Only female plants produce the berries, but both sexes need to be present to ensure fruit production. One male plant is enough to pollinate six to eight females. Winterberry will grow on any good garden soil. Many cultivars with superior winter fruit exist. (6 to 10 ft. height; equal spread).

Other deciduous shrubs to consider include deciduous azaleas, Butterfly-bush, Carolina allspice, sweet pepperbush, pearl bush, potentilla, and vitex (Chaste tree).

**Potentially Invasive Introduced or Alien Shrubs**

Following are some commonly available deciduous shrubs that are considered invasive. They can be “aggressive” by growing underground runners or by spreading seed. Ranking in parenthesis indicates the invasiveness level in natural areas and native plant habitats attributed to the shrub by the Virginia Native Plant Society and the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation.

**Japanese Barberry** (*Berberis thunbergii*)

Barberry is a rugged plant that adapts to many situations. It has been widely used as a hedge or barrier plant because of its thorny twigs. It is an easy plant to prune and can be clipped into tight hedges.

The small, yellow flowers are not especially showy but the bright-red berries are attractive in the fall. Barberry leaves normally have a good, red fall color. The variety *atropurpurea* has purple-red foliage throughout the growing season. ‘Crimson Pygmy,’ a dwarf purple-red-leaved cultivar, is also available. Varieties and cultivars tend to be slower growing and less aggressive. (3 to 6 ft. height; 4 to 7 ft. spread).

(Medium)

**Winged Euonymus** (*Euonymus alatus*)

Winged euonymus, a large shrub, can be used as a hedge because its neat, uniform appearance requires little or no pruning. Twigs of this shrub have corky ridges and are especially interesting in winter after catching a soft snow. This plant has excellent scarlet color in the fall. The compact variety, *E. alatus* ‘Compactus,’ grows to only 4 feet tall and is more commonly planted than the standard variety. Euonymus must be transplanted with earth around its roots. Once established, they require little care. (15 to 20 ft. height; equal spread).

(Medium)

**Winter Honeysuckle** (*Lonicera fragrantissima*)

This honeysuckle has stiff, leathery, almost evergreen foliage. The fragrant white flowers are borne early in spring. The red berries are produced in late spring but are quickly eaten by birds or covered by the current season’s growth. There are many improved varieties of this plant, but most of them are not widely available. Honeysuckle is useful in a shrub border or as a screening plant. (3 to 12 ft. height; equal spread).

(Low)

**Amur Honeysuckle** (*Lonicera maackii*)

Amur honeysuckle is the largest and fastest growing of all the shrub honeysuckles. Fragrant white flowers are produced in late May. Bright-red berries remain on the plant from September to November. Amur honeysuckle holds its leaves late in the fall, and it is not unusual for the plant to have green leaves and red berries at Thanksgiving time. Amur honeysuckle makes a fast growing screen, but it needs plenty of room to develop. (8 to 15 ft. height; 8 to 12 ft. spread).

(Medium)

**Privet** (*Ligustrum spp.*)

(Note: Chinese Privet, *L. sinense* is ranked High)

Privets are automatically considered hedge plants because they have been so widely grown for this purpose. Unsheared specimens produce pyramidal clusters of small, white flowers followed by similar clusters of black berries. Fruit remains on the plant most of the winter and provides considerable food for birds.

Privets are vigorous plants that will adapt to most types of soil under most conditions. They have the potential to be an invasive alien species, so use caution when planting. There are several varieties of privet available. They range from 4 to 12 feet in height. Some of the more popular varieties include:

‘Amur’ -one of the hardiest varieties.

‘Regel’ -a low cultivar with almost horizontal branches.

‘Golden Vicary’ -with bright-yellow foliage throughout the growing season.

**Buckthorn** (*Rhamnus frangula*)

Buckthorn was developed and is used almost solely as a hedge. A columnar cultivar will spread only about 4 feet wide and maintains its shape with little or no pruning. The foliage is a dense, dark, lustrous green. It is an excellent replacement for the often used Lombardy poplar which has so many problems, although it will not grow nearly as tall. Buckthorn is purchased and planted in spring as a bare root shrub. (10 to 12 ft. height; 8 to 12 ft. spread).

(Low)

**Autumn Olive** (*Elaeagnus umbellata*)

A large spreading shrub, the autumn olive is best known for its silvery-gray foliage. Small, yellow flowers are produced in mid-May, and are inconspicuous but very fragrant. The small, silvery berries change to red with silver flecks and hang on the plant until late fall. Although autumn olive is planted primarily for wildlife food and cover, it competes with native plants and disrupts habitat. (12 to 18 ft. height; equal spread).

(High)

*Elaeagnus angustifolia* (Low) and *E. pungens* (Low) are also considered to be invasive alien species.

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