



Groundcover Shrubs Make Great Garden Accents

BY SUSAN BOSS | AS PUBLISHED IN THE NEWS JOURNAL MARCH, 2011

After the seemingly unrelenting snow and ice of this winter, I'm enjoying the changeable weather, despite the rains of the past two weeks, as each day brings a little more warmth; and, most importantly, less chance of further snow. The first days of spring are just around the corner and, like me, I'm sure you're ready to get outside and attack those empty areas of the garden.

Last month in our Nature's Landscapes column we took a look at several evergreen herbaceous groundcovers that can enliven those bare spots in your garden. Perhaps, though, the area of your garden that needs attention is quite large or you want to add more year-round structure to the space. In this situation, rather than an herbaceous plant, a groundcover shrub may be what your garden needs.

When choosing a groundcover shrub, you could easily be wooed by the sight of pretty flowers in a catalog. But does this plant have more to offer or after flowering will it simply fade into the garden unnoticed for the remainder of the season? Fortunately, there is an excellent range of native groundcover shrubs perfect for the garden. Below is just a sampling of groundcover shrubs that are easy to grow and that will readily enhance your garden throughout the entire year.

Yellowroot (*Xanthorhiza simplicissima*) is an impressively adaptable woodland deciduous groundcover shrub. This multi-stemmed woody shrub spreads quickly to form a 2' to 3' tall dense mass with its celery-like shiny bright green leaves in summer. In early spring yellowroot produces attractive, though admittedly, inconspicuous airy purplish-brown flowers on its bare, leggy stems.

Yellowroot has a uniform growth habit and maintains clean foliage throughout the gardening season. It thrives in average to moist, acidic soils from full sun to part shade, but once established can handle dry shade or a wet, sunny spots.



Yellowroot spreads quickly to form a 2'-3' tall dense carpet of shiny bright green



Yellowroot displays attractive yellow fall color for many weeks.



Southern bush honeysuckle brings a welcome, bright shade of yellow to the quiet summer garden

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Because it is so adaptable, yellowroot is the perfect plant for those areas of the garden where a combination of growing conditions exist. This shrub produces a spectacular display of golden yellow to orange foliage for extended weeks of enjoyment in the fall, adding to its value as a superior garden plant.

Southern bush honeysuckle (*Diervilla sessilifolia*) is another durable groundcover shrub perfect for use as a backbone for structure in the garden. This easy-to-maintain, loose, upright suckering shrub is ideal for stabilizing banks or use in difficult situations where other plants will not grow.

Southern bush honeysuckle generally grows 2' to 5' tall depending on site conditions. It tolerates dry soil, infertile soils, and adapts to conditions from full sun to deep shade. The new growth of Southern bush honeysuckle develops a bronze cast that contrasts nicely against its shiny deep green foliage.

Southern bush honeysuckle is considered by many as a deer, disease, and pest resistant plant that will remain attractive the entire growing season. The dense terminal clusters of many small sulfur yellow flowers bring welcome color to the quiet summer garden. For a more compact, uniformly upright selection, 'Butterfly' is an excellent choice that also exhibits great fall color.

Fragrant sumac (*Rhus aromatica*) is an extremely tough plant that remains attractive the entire season and is the perfect solution for hard to mow, steep embankments. Fragrant sumac typically grows 4' to 7' tall with a spread up to 10' wide.

However, for smaller landscapes or refined settings, the cultivar 'Gro Low' reaches only 2' to 3' tall. It quickly spreads to 6' to 8' wide. 'Gro Low' develops attractive glossy, dark green, three-parted leaves. This female form features small yellow blossoms that arrive in early spring before the leaves appear.

While this native shrub thrives in full sun and hot, dry conditions, it can handle filtered shade in the garden as well. Best of all, fragrant sumac is a showstopper in the autumn landscape with striking orange, red, and purple fall color, along with hairy red fruit.

A true garden gem, considered by many to be one of our best native shrubs, **summer sweet clethra** (*Clethra alnifolia*) brightens up sunny to shaded garden settings during the typically uneventful time in the garden of mid-summer.

This multi-stemmed, upright suckering shrub will grow 5' to 8' tall in full sun to part shade. It prefers soils that are moist to wet and acidic but is amazingly adaptable to a variety of conditions including dry shade.



Gro-Low fragrant sumac is a showstopper in the autumn landscape with striking or-



Hummingbird summer sweet clethra blooms during mid-summer with a profusion of white bottle-brush flowers.



Dwarf fothergilla blooms with distinctive white bottlebrush-like flowers.

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Summer sweet clethra blooms during mid-summer with a profusion of ascending, wand-like white flowers that are remarkably fragrant and last up to two weeks. This deciduous shrub is late to leaf out in the spring but rewards gardeners with shiny, dark green leaves that turn an attractive yellow color in fall.

The cultivar ‘Hummingbird’ flowers earlier than the species and reaches an average height of 3’ tall making it a particularly effective candidate for groundcover shrub use for smaller garden settings.

As a woody groundcover, **dwarf fothergilla** (*Fothergilla gardenii*) has something to offer the garden in every season. As spring arrives and before leaves appear, dwarf fothergilla blooms with distinctive white bottlebrush-like flowers that have a light honey fragrance.

The bluish green leaves, similar to those of the witch-hazel, add a varying color and texture to the garden palette. Dwarf fothergilla typically reaches a height of 2’ to 3’ tall and will slowly colonize to carpet the ground.

It performs best in moist, well drained acidic soils but will tolerate drier soils with some shade. Although happy in partial shade, the best show of flowers on dwarf fothergilla develops in full sun. In the fall the foliage explodes into gorgeous shades of yellow, orange and red.

For foliage effects, ‘Blue Mist’ is a cultivar that was selected for its striking bluish green foliage.

When summer arrives and the garden seems to slow down, **Virginia sweetspire** (*Itea virginica*) stands out from other shrubs in the garden. A graceful arching shrub, it will mature at 4’ to 6’ tall (or taller if it is really happy) with medium to dark green leaves and lightly fragrant white flower clusters.

Though Virginia sweetspire is naturally found in moist to wet soils from full sun to filtered shade, it is very adaptable, tolerating considerable drought and deeper shade. Virginia sweetspire is also impressive in fall as its leaves develop dazzling shades of garnet-red and purple.

This multi-stemmed woody groundcover with multiple seasons of interest can be admired again in the winter as snow delicately adorns its arching stems. Many cultivars are now available that offer various traits. For example, ‘Henry’s Garnet’ has improved fall color and uniform growth and flowering, while ‘Little Henry’ is more compact than the species, reaching only 3’ to 4.5’ tall.

The examples above offer just a few choices for complementing your garden. They can serve important roles of filling garden voids, preventing unnecessary erosion in the garden, and extending interest across the seasons. Regardless of whether shrubs or herbaceous plants fit your garden, explore more thoroughly the value of native groundcovers. You’ll enjoy the results enormously.

Enjoy spring!



Henry’s Garnet Virginia sweetspire produces lightly fragrant white flower clusters.



About the Author

SUSAN BOSS, ENTRANCE LANDSCAPE HORTICULTURIST

Susan is responsible for overseeing the gardens along the entrance drive. Here she has planted swaths of groundcovers to delight visitors. Previously, she was a horticulturist at Winterthur Museum and Country Estate.