Native Plants for Rain Gardens

Flowering Perennials, Grasses, & Ferns

Shrubs & Small Trees

Turtle Creek Watershed Association
April 2008

Introduction:

The Turtle Creek Watershed Association promotes the use of rainfall and stormwater as the valuable natural resource it is.

We encourage measures to manage stormwater in ways that preserve or mimic natural infiltration or storage methods, thus allowing the rain to slowly reach our streams or ground water table. This prevents damage from erosion, sedimentation, sewer overflows, and flooding.

Gardens can be a good way to help manage stormwater. Their soils contain lots of organic matter that absorbs rainfall before it can run off. Plants take in water through their roots and transpire gallons of it each day through their leaves. These roots along with soil organisms such as earthworms and burrowing insects create tunnels that also allow water to infiltrate.

Native plants are well-adapted to local conditions. Relying upon them as the backbone of your garden is a good way to insure beautiful success while reducing maintenance chores. As noted in their descriptions, they often have value to wildlife (that prey upon harmful insects), and many were once used as medicines or dyes – beautiful as well as practical.

Limiting use of harsh chemical fertilizers and pesticides will protect beneficial organisms, allowing them to help you improve your soil and keep harmful insects in check. This will also reduce the amounts of these pollutants entering our streams and ground water. Relying upon integrated pest management approaches and upon milder fertilizers can also save money.

Gardeners who use rain barrels or cisterns to hold and store roof runoff have a source of pure water for their gardens – and can save money while reducing the volume of stormwater that causes local problems.

The following information is a
distillation of lists from:
US EPA, USDA, Pa DEP,
Brooklyn Botanical Garden,
Connecticut Botanic Garden,
Missouri Botanic Garden, and
Pennsylvania Native Plant Society

Please note: Specific genus and species names are important to obtain the correct plants. (That being true, as research into genetic relationships continues, genus names change from time to time to more accurately reflect these relationships.) Even so, all plants will not grow in all locations. Success depends upon light conditions, soil components and substrate, soil pH, soil nutrients, total water, animal activities, and proximity to roads (and road salt), among other factors. Determine conditions in your garden, then choose the plants best suited to your site.

Aster novae-angliae (New England aster)

USDA NRCS

- 30″- 36″; purple or pink flowers with yellow centers in August and September.
- Grows in full sun and damp soils from pH 5.5 to 7.5, but do not over-water. Drought tolerant when established.
- Attracts butterflies.

Cimicifuga racemosa (bugbane)

- 40″-60″; white flower stalks in July and August; large compound leaves with dark red tinges.
- Grows in shady spots in fertile, damp soils.
- Used as an estrogen replacement and pain reducer.
- Attracts beneficial insects; attracts butterflies.

USDA NRCS

Clelone oblique (rose turtlehead) or
C. glabra (white turtlehead)

USDA NRCS

- 24″-30″; pink or white flowers August - September.
- Grows in damp, partly shaded spots in rich, slightly acidic soils; likes leaf compost.
- Attracts butterflies.

USDA NRCS

Eleocharis obtuse (blunt spikerush)

- 12″-18″; brownish purple seed heads from July through October.
- Grows in a variety of soil textures and pHs, but prefers sun and dampness.
- Host plant for some butterflies; food source for birds.

USDA NRCS

Equisetum arvense (field horsetail)

- 24″-30″; primitive plant with no flowers, but beige "cones;" tiny green leaves form horizontal tufts at each stem node.
- Grows in a variety of damp soils from sun to shade.
- Used to stop bleeding, heal wounds and bones.
- Great accent plant; grow in containers to keep within bounds.

USDA NRCS

Erythronium americanum (trout lily or dogtooth violet)

- 6″; yellow flowers in May; speckled leaves.
- Grows in moist, rich soil in shade; slow to mature.
- Used as anti-biotic.
- Bulbs eaten by wildlife.

USDA NRCS

Iris versicolor

- 18″-24″; blue, purple, pink, white, or yellow flowers in June and July.
- Grows in partial shade in rich, damp soils.
- Used as emetic.
- Attracts hummingbirds.

USDA NRCS

Lobelia cardinalis (red cardinal flower)

- 24″-30″; red flower stalks in July and August.
- Prefers rich soils, consistently damp soils in partial shade; protect from deer browsing.
- Used to treat skin sores.
- Attracts butterflies and hummingbirds.

USDA NRCS

Lobelia siphilitica (blue cardinal flower)

- 24″-30″; blue flower stalks in July and August; forms clumps.
- Prefers rich soils, consistently damp soils in sun or light shade.
- Used as a cough remedy.
- Attracts butterflies and hummingbirds.

Matteuccia struthioptheris (ostrich fern)

- 36″; palm-like fronds that create cover.
- Grows in partial shade or sun in moist soils.
- Fiddleheads are a New England delicacy.
- Excellent cover for small reptiles and amphibians.


USDA NCRS

USDA NRCS

Monarda didyma or M. fistulosa (bee balm or bergamot)

- 36″; red to pink to purple flowers from July to August.
- Grows in full sun to partial shade in damp, fertile soil, forming clumps.
- Used as an anti-septic for wounds and throat infections.
- Attracts butterflies and hummingbirds.

Osmunda cinnamomea (cinnamon fern)

- 24″-30″; spores on brown spikes in July;
- Grows in partial shade in damp, acidic to neutral soils.
- Gelatinous root substance used to treat coughs.
- Provides good bird and amphibian cover.

USDA NRCS

USDA NRCS

Osmunda claytoniana (interrupted fern)

- 24″-30″; spores form in middle of fronds.
- Grows in partial shade in damp, acidic soils.
- No known medicinal uses; fiddleheads inedible.
- Mature clumps provides good cover.

Osmunda regalis (royal fern)

- 24″-30″; spores clusters form at the tips of fronds.
- Grows in partial shade in damp, acidic soils.
- Gelatinous root substance used to treat coughs (superior to *O. cinnamomea)*.
- Provides good bird and amphibian cover.

USDA NRCS

Physostegia virginiana (obedience plant)

- 24″; white or pink flower heads in July.
- Grows in full sun and average soil, but prefers cool roots (mulch).
- Attracts butterflies.

USDA NRCS

Podophyllum petatum (May apple)

- 14″; white flowers in April and May; colonies of palmate "umbrella" leaves; green then yellow "apples."
- Grows in moist, fertile soils in partial shade; dormant in late summer.
- Used carefully as antibiotic.
- Fruits eaten by wildlife.

USDA NRCS

USDA NRCS

Sedum ternatum (whorled stonecrop)

- 6″; white flowers May to June.
- Grows well in sun or shade in a variety of soils, conditions, and in pockets of soil in rocky sites. Drought tolerant.
- Good nectar plant.

Thelypteris noveboracensis (New York fern)

- 12″-18″; yellow green fronds.
- Needs slightly damp, rich, lightly acidic soils in partial shade.
- Wildlife eat fiddleheads.

USDA NRCS

USF&W

Tiarella cordifolia (foam flower)

- 12″-15″; white flowers in June; forms clumps.
- Prefers to grow in partial shade in damp, loose, loamy soils with a pH between 6.5 and 8.5.
- Used medicinally for mild digestive ailments, skin and eye infections.
- Attracts butterflies.

Viola canadensis (white violet)

Viola sororia (common blue violet)

- 6″-8″; blue / white flowers in April and May.
- Prefers moist, humusy, neutral soils; sun to open shade.
- Used as pain reliever; edible, ornamental flowers.
- Attracts butterflies.

USDA NRCS

Clethra alnifolia (sweet pepperbush)

- 4′-6′; white flower spires in August.
- Grows in slightly acidic, damp, well-drained soils in partial shade.
- Used as soap substitute
- Attracts butterflies.

USDA NRCS

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Cephalanthus occidentalis (button bush)

- 6′-12′; white flowers in June; interesting seed balls.
- Prefers wet soils in sun to partial shade.
- Used in small amounts to reduce inflammation.
- Attracts butterflies; seeds eaten by birds.

Cornus sericia (red osier dogwood)

- 5′-15′; white flower clusters in May; white berries in late summer.
- Grows in damp, lightly acidic, fertile soils in partial to full sun.
- Used as an anti-inflammatory; red dye; twigs used to make baskets.
- Seeds eaten by wildlife.

USDA NRCS

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Hamamelis virginiana (witch hazel)

- 15′; delicate yellow flowers in October.
- Prefers richly organic, moist soils, but is very adaptable once established.
- Used as a skin astringent to treat inflammation, insect bites, etc.
- Attractive bird nesting sites and a late season nectar source for insects.

Ilex verticillata (winterberry holly)

- 5'-10'; inconspicuous white flowers in June and July; red berries in fall on female plants – persist into winter.
- Prefers moist, slightly acidic soils.
- Contains caffeine-like alkaloids, toxic in small quantities.
- Birds eat berries.

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Itea virginica [Henry's garnet] (sweetspire)

- 3'-4'; fragrant white flower spikes in June; dark red foliage in the fall.
- Is normally a wetland shrub, but adaptable to a wide variety of moisture, soil, and pH conditions.
- Attracts butterflies.

USDA NRCS

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Lindera benzoin (spicebush)

- 6'-8'; fragrant yellow flowers in May; red berries in fall on female plants.
- Good damp understory shrub.
- Used to treat colds, coughs, and parasites.
- Host plant for butterfly larvae; birds eat berries.

Staphylea trifolia (bladdernut)

- 15'-20'; white flower clusters in May; unusual seed pods in fall.
- Prefers medium, damp yet well drained soils; partial shade.
- Used for edible oil from seeds.
- Bird habitat.

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Sambucus canadensis (elderberry)

- 6'-10'; white flower clusters in June; purple berries.
- Widely adaptable, but prefers damp, medium soils in sun or partial shade.
- Used as a stimulant, insecticide, and dye; nutritious, tart berries.
- Attracts butterflies; birds eat fruit.

USDA NRCS

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Viburnum dentatum (arrowwood) ***Viburnum nudum*** (witherod) ***Viburnum prunifolium*** (blackhaw)

- 5'; white, fragrant, flat clusters in May; dark blue berries in August.
- Grows in sun or open shade in slightly damp conditions, but is adaptable to many soil types.
- Fruits rich in vitamin C.
- Attracts butterflies and birds.

Viburnum trilobum (highbush cranberry)

- 5'; white, fragrant, flat clusters in May; red berries in August.
- Grows in sun or open shade in slightly damp conditions, but is adaptable to many soil types.
- Fruits rich in vitamin C
- Attracts butterflies and birds.

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