

Native Edibles in the Landscape

by Nancy Bell, Master Gardener

What could be better than putting native plants in your home landscape to attract and feed wildlife? Perhaps planting natives that attract wildlife and feed people too! Edible plants don't need to be confined to the vegetable plot in the backyard. There are many plants that happen to be edible and are attractive enough to be used alongside your other ornamentals. We just need to start thinking outside the plot. Let me help you change your perspective.

How about starting with trees? There are a number of fruiting trees that have beautiful flowers in the springtime and unlike their strictly ornamental relatives, will reward you with fruit later in the year. There are several statuesque nut trees that are native and some beautiful berry-bearing ones as well. A few of my favorites are the Serviceberries (*Amelanchier* sp.), Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) and American Beech (*Fagus grandifolia*). There are so many wonderful attributes to these plants that I cannot believe they are not more widely used.

Serviceberries, which are small trees/large shrubs, are covered in glorious white blossoms in early spring, and then ripen into an abundance of fruit in June. Later in the year, the fall colors are show-stopping shades of gold, orange and red. The Pawpaw produces dark purple-maroon flowers in early spring. The pollinators for these flowers are beetles and flies, so the odor they produce is not really one that we humans appreciate. Fortunately this is a mild fragrance! Pawpaw fruit is the largest native, edible fruit (actually a berry) produced in North America. In the fall, the large leaves turn a beautiful clear gold. Pawpaw trees are self-sterile, so two different plants are necessary for fruit. This is also the larval host plant for the fabulous Zebra Swallowtail butterfly. Last of the trees, the American Beech produces nuts that are pleasant to taste. Additionally, the perfectly smooth, gray bark accents the wooded landscape.

Now, on to shrubs. Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*) is a large shrub that blooms in early summer. The showy, large white flower heads, made up of many small individual flowers, are edible. By late summer, the flower heads have developed into large clusters of dark purple fruit, so heavy that the branches begin to droop. The seeds should not be eaten in large quantities, so this fruit is best prepared as jams and jellies, with the seeds removed by a sieve. Next, the Blueberries (*Vaccinium* sp.) a favorite of many, bloom profusely in late spring and are quite attractive. The fruit ripens in mid to late summer. Although it will self-pollinate, you should have at least two or three different varieties to maximize the fruiting potential. The fall color is unrivaled in vibrant shades of scarlet. In the winter, the stems become quite red and help to brighten the normal browns and grays of the season. Blueberries are truly four season plants and are the larval host plant to more than 60 species of butterflies and moths. With both the Blueberry and Elderberry, you will be competing with the birds for the fruit and you may need to use a net.

Here's a surprise. Did you know that unlike most ferns, Ostrich Fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*) is edible? Ostrich Fern can be harvested in the spring as the 'fiddleheads' are beginning to emerge, very much like harvesting asparagus. It is these fiddleheads that are eaten steamed, boiled or raw. Never take more than 1/3 of the plant or it may begin to decline.

As with any new food, it is important to taste first in small quantities to test for allergies or other reactions. Also remember to consult reputable sources of information for methods of harvesting or preparing edible plants.

Do you have a wet area that's become troublesome? Some of the plants mentioned will be very happy there. The Pawpaw, Serviceberry, Blueberry and even the Ostrich Fern (on a shady edge) will do fabulously and give you the bonus of food, as well an attractive solution. I hope that this gives you some new and different ideas for using native plants.

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