

Beautiful Plants for Rain Gardens and Damp Spots

By Lori Athey, Guided Path Design

Do you have a spot in your garden that stays wet for 3 to 36 hours after a rainstorm? Maybe you have a rain garden, gutter garden, stream or floodplain. Lucky you! You can grow a host of native plants that the rest of us would need to pamper. Due to Delaware's location along the Coastal Plain of the Eastern Seaboard, we are blessed with many different types of wetlands and many excellent plants from which to choose. Here are just a few:

You may already know about the River Birch (*Betula nigra*) with its peeling salmon-colored bark, the Red Maple's (*Acer rubrum*) stunning fall color, and Eastern Bald Cypress (*Taxodium distichum*) with its knobby knees. Another tree for damp spots is the Swamp White Oak (*Quercus bicolor*). This majestic oak grows 50 to 60 feet tall with an equal or greater spread, sporting yellow fall color.

For those with less space, try the Sweetbay Magnolia or the Pawpaw. Sweetbay Magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*) grows 15 to 25 feet tall and displays fragrant white flowers during May and June. The immature fruit looks like a small pickle, gradually turns pink, then splits to reveal red seeds relished by the birds. Plant this small tree near an open window or patio where you can enjoy its fragrance. The Pawpaw (*Asimina triloba*) is the primary larval food source of the rare Zebra Swallowtail butterfly. It grows 15 to 20 feet tall in full sun, but may become a shrub in shady locations. It has large, tropical-looking leaves and its fruit, eaten by people and wildlife, tastes a bit like banana.

Popular shrubs for wet spots include Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), Inkberry (*Ilex glabra*) and Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*). Also consider Swamp Azalea, Virginia Sweetspire (*Itea virginica*) and Winterthur Smooth Witherod (*Viburnum nudum*). Swamp Azalea (*Rhododendron viscosum*) grows 5 to 7 feet tall by 3 to 5 feet wide, with fragrant white flowers in June. Virginia Sweetspire grows only 4 to 5 feet tall, is adaptable to almost any location, and is ornamental in 3 seasons. After the blood-red fall foliage drops, the exposed deep maroon twigs provide winter interest. In the spring this small plant is covered with frothy white flowers on weeping racemes reminiscent of chenille plant. Winterthur Smooth Witherod grows to about 6 feet. It has lustrous deep green leaves turning a nice burgundy color in fall. With a nearby pollinator, the lacy white spring flowers transform into pink berries during the summer, eventually becoming blue then black before the birds eat them.

Good herbaceous plants for damp spots include Northern Blueflag Iris (*Iris versicolor*), Swamp Rose Mallow (*Hibiscus moscheutos*) and Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*). Other perennials include Canada Anemone, Joe Pye Weed, Turtlehead, and Ladies Tresses. Canada Anemone (*Anemone canadensis*) is a vigorous grower for full sun or part shade and makes a beautiful mass groundcover. Out-competing most other perennials, it has pure

white flowers in June and attractive green foliage. Eastern and Spotted Joe Pye Weed (*Eupatorium dubium* and *E. maculatum*) grow 4 to 6 feet tall with pink/mauve flowers from mid-July through mid-September. Preferring full sun, they attract many species of butterflies including swallowtails and monarchs. Turtlehead (*Chelone* species) has pink or white flowers from mid-August to mid-October with deep green foliage; it likes afternoon shade. Ladies Tresses (*Spiranthes odorata*) is a hardy orchid and happiest in shade. Plant this where you can see its delicate white spires in September and October, which rise above glossy green basal leaves.

Finally, don't forget the fern family. Several that will reward you include the Ostrich Fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*), as well as the Royal and Cinnamon Ferns (*Osmunda regalis* and *O. cinnamomea*).

For gardeners with average moisture conditions, many of the plants described in this article may require extra watering to thrive, but all you really need to do is relax and enjoy their beauty.

One way to easily ensure proper watering is to collect water from your roof into a rain barrel and attach a hose that leads into your garden. This method is especially effective when funneling water into a rain garden or low area that collects and absorbs it slowly. Using rain barrels is a great way to ensure plenty of available water during drought seasons, helps the environment by reducing storm water runoff, and saves money over time. 55-gallon rain barrels will once again be available for purchase at the Delaware Nature Society's native plant sale for \$82.