

## 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, designed to capture and purify water runoff, or perhaps you live along a 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, or the Red Maple's, *Acer rubrum*, stunning fall color. But have you considered Blackgum, *Nyssa sylvatica*, which produces berries for early migrating birds and rivals the Red Maple with its reddish-purple 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, *Rhododendron viscosum*, Virginia Sweetspire, *Itea virginica*, and Possumhaw, *Viburnum nudum*. Swamp Azalea grows approximately 7 feet tall by 5 feet wide, with fragrant white flowers in June. Virginia Sweetspire grows about 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. Possumhaw grows to about 8 feet in height. 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 Blue Flag Iris, *Iris versicolor*, Swamp Rose Mallow, *Hibiscus moscheutos*, and Cardinal Flower, *Lobelia cardinalis*. Other perennials include the Joe-Pye Weeds, *Eutrochium sp.*, Turtleheads, *Chelone sp.*, and Marsh Ladies Tresses, *Spiranthes odorata*. The different species of Joe-Pye Weed grow from between 2-7 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. The two species of Turtlehead have pink or white flowers

from mid-August to mid-October with deep green foliage. Marsh Ladies Tresses 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*, Royal Fern, *Osmunda regalis*, and Cinnamon Fern, *Osmundastrum cinnamomea*.

The plants described in this article thrive with plenty of water. One way to easily ensure proper watering is to collect it from your roof into a rain barrel and attach a hose that leads into your garden. Using rain barrels also helps to ensure plenty of available water during drought seasons, helps the environment by reducing storm water runoff, and saves money over time. Rain barrels are especially effective when funneling into a rain garden or low area that collects and absorbs water slowly. For more information about the benefits of rain gardens and how to install one on your property visit [HYPERLINK](http://www.raingardensforthebays.org) "[http://www.raingardensforthebays.org"](http://www.raingardensforthebays.org) [www.raingardensforthebays.org](http://www.raingardensforthebays.org).