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# SUNNYSIDE THYMES

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## Know Your Natives

By Margie Conard, SMG Member

### NATIVE SHRUBS Part 1

This article continues to extol the virtues of planting more native plants. Here are a few suggestions for landscaping with native shrubs which have adapted to our climate and will be more apt to survive with less maintenance and fewer chemicals that impair our environment. Shrubs are perfect for creating a boundary, a backdrop, or screen of privacy. Planting in a zig-zag pattern creates a fuller look. In addition, by cultivating flowering shrubs you are more easily providing three or more flowering species throughout the seasons.

**New Jersey Tea** (*Ceanothus americanus*, Buckthorn Family) is a low, upright deciduous shrub growing to about three feet tall. Small white flowers grow in 2-inch branch tipped clusters at the leaf axils on new growth. Each flower has five small white petals, shaped like tiny tobacco pipes. The base of this plant is woody with spreading herbaceous branches above. It has low to medium water requirements, can take the sun or part shade, and has high drought tolerance. It is a very adaptable species with its large, deep root system.



*New Jersey Tea*

Rebekah D. Wallace, Univ  
of Georgia, Bugwood.org

New Jersey Tea makes a lovely ornamental ground cover with its low-growing habitat, perfect for rocky hillsides. The flowers have nectar that is a favorite of butterflies, and the brown fruits and seeds are loved by the birds. Importantly, it is the larval host of the Spring Azure, Summer Azure, and Mottled Dusty-wing butterfly.

The leaves are harvested for tea, gathered in summer when the plants are flowering. Dry leaves in a warm oven, steep 1 fresh tablespoon or 1 dried teaspoon in 1 cup of boiling water for 15 minutes. Sweeten to taste. The Native Americans used the dried root bark as a sedative. New Jersey Tea can be propagated by seeds, softwood cuttings, and hardwood cuttings which would need to be stratified.

### Carolina Silverbell

(*Halesia tetraptera*, Storax Family) is a shrub I first saw while on a hike on Cardinal Hill in Louisville. I was completely amazed to see beautiful dainty flowers dangling from wispy branches, the shrub clinging gingerly to the stream bank in the woods. The branches are



*Carolina Silverbell*

Jim Robbins, NC Extension

low. Often the Silverbell has several trunks, with rounded crowns. The brown stringy bark from young stems gradually becomes darker gray and when mature has black, brown, or gray scaly ridges. The leaves are dark yellow-green, 2 inches to five inches long, with little fall color. Before the leaves fully leaf out in April or May, the flowers appear, long white bell-shaped flowers in clusters from the axils.

The four-winged ovoid fruits, 1-1 ½ inch ripen in September or October. The shrub prefers cool and well-drained acid moist soils in the shade in a protected location. At maturity, it will reach 20 to 30 feet and is hardy in zones 5 through 8. Ripe seed can be sown directly into the ground in the fall but may take 2 years to germinate.

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### Common Winterberry

(*Ilex verticillata*, Holly Family) is a deciduous shrub with compact growth, and many fine twiggly branches. Stems are dark brown with dark green leaves, 1 ½ - 3 inches long, which turn yellow to purple in the Fall. The bright red fruit (1/4" diameter) ripen in September and remain on the shrub through the winter until eaten by birds. Over 48 varieties of birds and other wildlife love these berries, but the fruits are poisonous to people. Winterberry grows well in full sun and well drained soils and also does fine in shady moist areas. The berries make lovely fall color in the winter landscape. This plant grows 6 feet to 10 feet high and wide in zones 3 through 9 and needs a male for pollination.



Common Winterberry

Jim Robbins, NC Extension

### Buttonbush

(*Cephalanthus occidentalis*, Madder Family) is a reliable native shrub, if it receives plenty of moisture. It will thrive in zones 5 through 10. Leaves are 2" to 6" long. It blooms in rounded white racemes 1 ½" in diameter, in August. When bloom has ended, these white rounded balls persist, slowly losing their fluff, until only the small, hard, rounded core is left (about the size of a small cherry stone).



Buttonbush

Debbie Roos, NC Exten.

The pioneers covered these hard centers with fabric for buttons.

These shrubs grow about 5 to 8 feet high and wide and are often found around ponds or small lakes in Indiana and Kentucky, in full sun or 4 to 6 hours of partial sun. The Buttonbush is very attractive to bees and butterflies with its globular shape full of nectar, hence the names globe-flower or honeyballs. It also attracts over 24 species of birds!

Native Americans and early pioneers used this plant for medicinal purposes but it contains glycosides and is poisonous to livestock.

### References

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