

HOA Brief on Planting Areas with Natives

Replacing large expanses of turf with attractive areas of native plants, shrubs and trees will help native insects and birds and can make your common areas more attractive and interesting. Turf grasses are not native to North America and do not support best practices for treatment and maintenance of the natural landscape. You can use islands and/or borders of plantings to break up the grassy areas to lend interest and beauty to your common grounds. Native areas are initially a bit more work than simply mowing grass, but as these areas mature the maintenance decreases and can actually be less work than mowing turf. This Brief will suggest planting ideas that will allow you to get started and decide what you want to plant.

To maximize the benefit of your planted areas for birds and other wildlife, note the types of insects that are supported by native plants you choose. Birds require insect larva to feed their young, as they cannot support nestlings and fledglings with seeds. Plants that support larva are called host plants. Plants that provide grown insects with nectar are called nectar plants. A fully rounded landscape required both host and nectar plants.

Birds also need the energy and fat provided by berries and fruits. Plants that provide fruits and berries in the late summer and fall prepare birds for migration or support them through the winter in our area.

We suggest you start small. Select an area, maybe two, to work for the first year or so. Once you get some experience and your HOA members are supportive, you can tackle more projects. Remember you can always contact the Loudoun County Extension Master Gardeners (EMGs) for consultation, tips and ideas. An EMG can meet with you to talk through your questions and plans.

We strongly suggest you have one or more champions within your HOA who has the full support of the Board to guide these projects through and stay with them over time. A garden or landscape is not a one-and-done activity. These are living micro ecosystems that will evolve over time. Guiding the evolution of your native areas is an enjoyable part of the on-going process, but it takes commitment.

Planning

The first thing you want to do is plan. Plan the method you want to remove the turf. We have a few suggestions for you to consider in the next section.

When planning an area, determine the size and what you want to plant. What are your objectives: do you want an area that includes plants that provide a series of flowering times throughout the growing season, plants that have interesting foliage, provide good fall color, support insects and birds, add shade, control erosion, etc.? Consider: is the area currently sunny or shady or a bit of both? Is the ground at an incline, and if so in which direction. This will indicate the water flow through the area. Does the soil in the area tend to be dry or moist, and is the area windy? Is the soil type clay (likely in Virginia), loamy or sandy? One of the benefits of native plants is they have evolved to live and thrive in our soil, regardless if the soil is considered "poor". This also means you do not have to add amendments to areas that you convert from turf to native plants. Test the area for soil pH. Many plants can grow in a range of pH values and soil types, but to get the most from your time and expense it's good to match the plants with the pH and soil type. All these considerations will help you choose plantings that are the most likely to success.



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Be prepared also for some failures. This is normal in creating planting areas. Not all plants will do well, no matter how good your planning. Some plants may do too well and need to be cut back or even removed.

Check your HOA and local regulations for set-backs and clearances, etc. before you choose the areas you will develop. Review your HOA plat to make sure the area is on common property and is not on a homeowner's property. Identify whether any utilities are in the ground or overhead.

Design your planting areas to fit with the buildings and open spaces surrounding them. There is no right size, but when determining the area to be used, you will want to take into consideration the views from nearby houses as well as curb appeal. Hardscape objects like stone walkways, statuary, and containers can add interest and create definition of the area. Make a sketch as you work on the area, walk the area and update your sketch. As stated above, your planting areas are always evolving so the sketch is just that, but it will help as you plan.

Removing Turf

Do not spray chemicals to kill turf grass in the areas you want to remodel. Herbicides kill soil organisms as well as plants. It is very difficult to have success with soil where organism diversity and counts are reduced. Herbicides also run off of the target area and can harm surrounding turf or plantings. There are other methods to get rid of turf. Following are three methods described by Ivette Soler in "The Edible Front Yard". If sod removal by members of the HOA is not of interest, hire someone to do it for you.

1. Sod Cutting.

Sod cutting is the fastest method to remove the sod and start planting.

You will need the following materials:

- A large tarp
- A straight edged shovel
- Muscle

The steps include:

- Outline the area you want to work on
- Lay out the tarp to collect sod
- Cut a line with the shovel along the boundary of the area
- Make a parallel cut one shovel width inside the boundary cut for a few feet
- Push shovel under the thatched roots to lift the sod from the ground
- Fold sod on top of itself 3 times, cut and remove the folded stack to the tarp
- Repeat until the area is done
- Put sod in an out-of-the way place and cover with black plastic to kill the roots and seeds, then add it to your compost pile

Repeat these steps until the sod is removed from the entire area. The area is ready to be planted. When you are putting in native plants there is no need to amend the soil.

2. Solarizing

Solarizing will take approximately six months to complete. It's best started in the warm seasons because it is the heat generated under the plastic sheet that kills the grass and seeds.

You will need the following materials:

- Water
- Newspaper: black and white ink only, no glassy or colored pages
- Plastic 1-4 mils thick
- Landscape staples, block, or boards to secure the plastic
- Compost

The steps include:

- Water the sod and lay 2 sheets newspaper over the area; wet the newspaper
- Lay plastic on the newspaper and secure; leave in place 6-10 weeks
- Remove plastic, flip dead grass upside down; cover with 3 inches compost, water the area
- Replace plastic and leave for 4 more weeks
- Remove plastic, add new thin of mulch, and you are ready to plant. There is no need to amend the soil in an area that is solarized

3. Layering

Layering will also take approximately six months, and is best done during warm weather.

You will need the following materials:

- Cardboard (not wax coated)
- Newspaper black and white inks only, no glassy or colored pages
- Organic mulch: compost, leaf mulch, straw, or shredded bark

The steps include:

- Cut the grass very short
- Put cardboard and newspaper in layers, overlapping any seams or gaps by 6 inches; use sticks to anchor cardboard; water thoroughly
- Cover with thick layer (4-6 inches) of organic mulch
- Wait 6 months for the layers to decompose
- Plant directly into the layers

Choosing Your Plants

Once you have planned the location and design of the native plant area and removal of any turf, you are ready to make decisions on what plantings to include. You will want to match the size of the plantings to the size of the area. Attempt to have interest in at least two, if not three or four season. Perennials bloom for part of a growing season whereas annuals bloom most of the season. This means knowing when various plants bloom so you can have a succession of color. See below for suggestions by bloom season. You can create beauty and interest by combining plantings that have various types, colors and texture of leaves. As always, consider fruit or berries, fall color, seed, and winter seed pods of your chosen plants.

An environment that reflects nature includes four layers of plants. Try to include at least two layers in any planted area to give it substance and interest. From top to bottom the layers are:

- 1) Canopy: large trees such as oak, beech, tulip poplar, native pines, wild cherry, or hackberry
- 2) Understory: medium trees that grow beneath or on the edges of large tree populations such as red bud, serviceberry, elderberry, witch-hazel, dogwood, or sourwood
- 3) Shrubs

4) Vegetative and ground covers including native flowering plants and grasses.

Below is a short list of native plants in each of the four layers. There are many more that you can find in such publications as "Native Plants for Northern Virginia", a spiral bound publication that can be purchased in many nurseries and online. It is available for download for free at www.plantnovanatives.org, along with more information on the topic. The US Fish and Wildlife Service publishes an excellent and comprehensive guide, "Native Plants for Wildlife Habitat and Conservation Landscaping, Chesapeake Bay Watershed", also available online for free or in hardcopy. You can also search the web for "native plants of northern Virginia" to find many lists of our native species.

Native canopy tree	Number of butterfly and moth species supported
Oak	534
Wild Cherry	456
Willow	455
Birch	411
Aspen	367

Other native Virginia canopy trees that attract and support our iconic butterflies are tulip poplar, hackberry, and red maple.

Medium sized or understory trees are very important to a landscape of native plantings. The size is about 10 feet up to 40-60 feet. Check the size of any specific understory tree to make sure it fits the design of the area in question. These trees also host insect larva, provide nectar for butterflies and moths and seeds and berries for birds.

Eastern redbud	American dogwood
Downy serviceberry	Sourwood
Elderberry	American hornbeam
Witch-hazel	Washington hawthorn
American hazelnut	Sassafras

Nectar and host plants support insects, including bees, pollinating flies, butterflies, and moths. These plants are perennials. Because they are native they will spread either by self-seeding or by root. An initial planting of a few plants will spread and intermingle over time. This means that you do not need to purchase dozens of pots of any one plant type to fill an area. Below are bloom times for several native perennials.

Spring	Summer	Fall
Common blue violet	Native mints, including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • bee balm, • wild bergamot, • mountain mint, • spotted bee balm 	Asters, including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New York aster • New England • Golden aster • White wood aster • Stiff-leaf aster • Smooth blue

Golden ragwort	Liatris	Boneset
Wild geranium	Sweet pepper bush (Clethra)	Helianthus
Columbine	Joe Pye weed	Joe Pye weed
American viburnums	Lobelia	Goldenrods
Baptisia	Virginia sweetspire	White snakeroot
Bluet	Native petunia	Rudbeckia
Blue lupine	Butterfly weed	Common evening primrose

Shrubs that support birds with fruit, seeds and berry:

- American spirea
- Red or Black chokeberry
- Winterberry holly (needs male and female plants to produce berries)
- Native American viburnums
- Fragrant (low glowing) sumac
- Wild or smooth hydrangeas
- New Jersey tea
- Native euonymus (strawberry bush)
- Northern spicebush
- American beautyberry
- Common ninebark
- Native azalea
- High bush and low bush blueberry

Avoid Invasive Species

It is best to avoid invasive plant species. They do not support insect or bird populations, and they crowd out native plant species. This has become a serious problem because invasive non-native plants escape our yards and negatively affect our woods, forest and meadow areas. Below is a suggested list of native replacements for commonly planted invasive species.

Invasive Species	Suggested Native Species Alternatives
Norway maple	Red maple, oaks, basswood
Chocolate vine or Five-leaf akebia Porcelain-berry Golden hops vine	Carolina or yellow jessamine, trumpet or coral honeysuckle, crossvine
Japanese barberry	Inkberry holly, winterberry holly, arrowwood viburnum, Virginia sweetspire
Golden bamboo, fishpole bamboo, walking stick bamboo	Eastern red cedar
Liriope	Pennsylvania and blue wood sedge, Virginia wildrye, bottlebrush grass
Miscanthus (silvergrass)	Little bluestem
Bradford pear	Serviceberry, hawthorns, redbud, dogwood
English ivy	Virginia creeper, golden ragwort, native ferns, creeping phlox, wild or Canadian ginger
Burning bush	Blueberries, Virginia sweet spire, fothergilla
Japanese (Hall's) honeysuckle	Trumpet honeysuckle, yellow jessamine, crossvine

Wisteria floribunda and sinensis	American wisteria
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From "Native Plants for Northern Virginia"

We hope this Brief has helped spur your interest in including native plantings in your common areas. Please contact the Loudoun County EMGs for further information and support at loudounmg@vt.edu .

Bibliography

The following books and publications were used as resources for this Brief. These are excellent reference materials and provide much more information than is summarized in the Brief.

"The Edible Front Yard", by Ivette Soler. Published by Timber Press Inc, Portland, OR, 2011.

"Edible Landscaping", by Rosalind Creasy, Published by Counterpoint, Berkley, CA, 2010

"Native Plants for Northern Virginia", published by Virginia Witmer, *Coastal Zone Management Program*, and Corey Miles, *Northern Virginia Regional Commission*. Can be downloaded for free, or purchased from online vendors or at many native plant nurseries.

"Native Plants for Wildlife Habitat and Conservation Landscaping, Chesapeake Bay Watershed", published by US Fish and Wildlife Service. This is downloadable for free or hardcopy can be purchased from online vendors. Due to the amount of information hardcopy is more practical.

"Bringing Nature Home", by Douglas W. Tallamy, published by Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2007

"Nature's Best Hope", by Douglas W. Tallamy, published by Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2020

"Planting: A New Perspective", by Piet Oudolf and Noel Kingsbury, published by Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2013

Additional Resources

The *My Backyard Program* from Loudoun County Extension Master Gardeners:

<https://loudouncountymastergardeners.org/programs/my-backyard/>

Soil Sampling for the Home Gardener:

<https://resources.ext.vt.edu/contentdetail?contentid=2087&contentname=Soil%20Sampling%20For%20The%20Home%20Gardener>

Proper planting:

- Shrubs:
<https://resources.ext.vt.edu/contentdetail?contentid=1503&contentname=Shrubs:%20Functions,%20Planting,%20and%20Maintenance>
- Trees:
<https://resources.ext.vt.edu/contentdetail?contentid=1272&contentname=Planting%20Trees>

Proper mulching:

<https://resources.ext.vt.edu/contentdetail?contentid=1279&contentname=Mulching%20for%20a%20Healthy%20Landscape>