

Edible Landscapes: Woody Plants

This article will discuss incorporating woody edibles attractively into the home landscape.



High bush blueberries in the landscape. Photo: Margaret Hoffman, Penn State

This discussion will consider brambles, shrubs, and fruit-bearing trees. I won't address nut-bearing woody plants. See [Edible Landscapes: Herbs and Flowers](#) for suggestions on including edible perennials and annuals into a home landscape.

Let's start with some attractive fruit-bearing shrubs for the home landscape. High bush blueberry, *Vaccinium corymbosum*, immediately comes to mind. High bush blueberry is a member of the Ericaceae family, meaning it prefers acidic soils. Like other members of the Ericaceae family, such as rhododendrons, they prefer well-drained soil. They produce fruit on one-year-old branches, after producing a crop of berries the branch hardens and does not produce again unless you prune it. High bush blueberry has gorgeous fall color ranging from deep maroon to yellow-orange and is hardy in zones 4-7. Be careful choosing cultivars, not all are hardy to zone 4. Give a high bush blueberry lots of space, 4 – 5 ft, and mulch well to protect the shallow roots. This mulch layer will also help control weeds which can out-compete the blueberry roots for water and nutrients. Some varieties can grow 6-12' tall with an equal spread, so place accordingly. Common varieties are Bluecrop, Jersey, Patriot and for smaller areas, Sunshine Blue and North Blue.



High bush blueberry in the landscape. Photos: Margaret Hoffman, Penn State

I also enjoy low bush blueberry, *Vaccinium angustifolium*, in the landscape. This low growing native has delicate urn-shaped flowers in May, showy reddish fall foliage, and tasty fruit. While this shrub will grow in part shade, the best fall color and fruiting occurs in full sun in acidic, moist well-drained soil. The low growing habit, 6"-2' tall, can make this a good selection as an edging shrub for the landscape or home vegetable garden, provided your pH is low enough.

I think it is fairly difficult to add brambles (raspberries and blackberries) attractively to the home landscape. They just don't play well with other plants and make maintenance of more traditional shrubs and perennials a challenge. If you simply must have your fresh raspberries, I suggest planting them along a fence line, in full sun.

Our native red elderberries, *Sambucus racemosa var. pubens*, has much to offer even if it does not sport the beautiful lacy foliage of the more ornamental European cousins. Left unpruned the elderberry can reach 20 ft in height and spread considerably through suckers, but you can prune to control. The flowers are dome-shaped, white and fragrant, occurring in late spring to early summer. These flowers are followed by dark red berries which are more attractive to wildlife than humans. You can use them to make jelly and wine, but raw they are pretty sour. Elderberries can be used in the back of a landscape bed, massed in a naturalized area or even as an accent with its attractive foliage, flowers and fruit. Have a wet area you need a plant for? Try elderberry!

Another native small tree or large shrub is *Amelanchier* sp. or serviceberry. This attractive species brings four seasons of interest to the landscape. Beautiful white spring flowers, fruit that start to ripen in June (thus another common name,



Juneberry), attractive grey bark and red, orange to yellow fall color. There are many different types of serviceberry, they differ in size and growth habit but most are hardy from zones 4-8, prefer full sun to part shade and moist soils. Most often the fruit is consumed by birds before the homeowner ever gets to them, but if you are able to harvest, the purple pome fruits make tasty jams and jellies. A personal favorite of mine is *Amelanchier x grandiflora*, a cross between downy serviceberry, *A. arborea*, and Allegheny serviceberry, *A. laevis*. The variety 'Autumn Brilliance' provides reliable red-orange fall color and is resistant to many of the foliar diseases that plague plants in the Rosaceae family. It is also fairly drought tolerant, a nice plus. If you need a cultivar with fastigate shape there is the variety "Snowcloud". Its fastigate growth habit makes it perfect as a street tree or in a landscape with limited space. *A. arborea*, common serviceberry has the largest fruit of the genus, and often forms several leaders, making it perfect for a naturalized feel. Its pollution tolerance makes it particularly well adapted for the urban landscape.

I personally love the American cranberry bush, *Viburnum opulus var americanum*, formerly *V. trilobum*. This native is a gorgeous addition to any landscape with stunning lacecap white flowers in May, bright red berries and if you pick the right plant, outstanding fall color. I often will wait till fall to choose this plant from the nursery or garden center so I can assess the fall color. The straight species makes quite an impact in the landscape, reaching a height of 8–12 ft with an equal spread. It is extremely hardy; its native range includes northern Minnesota. Best flowering and fall color occur in full sun and while it prefers moisture it is pretty tolerant of a wide range of soils and moisture regimes. The berries can be used to make jams and jellies and although they might shrivel after frost, they are persistent on the shrub through winter. This cranberry bush is a superior choice to *V. opulus*, European cranberry bush, which is often invasive. If you have limited space try one of the smaller cultivars. Bailey Compact reaches 5 to 6 ft high, has a rounded form, and deep red fall color. Another possibility is 'Compactum' which grows 5 -6 ft high and wide with yellow fall color. Bird and butterfly friendly with four seasons of interest mean this native really earns its place in the urban landscape.

How about *Rosa rugosa*? This attractive rose is hardy in zones 3 – 9 and is graced with fragrant flowers. Flower color ranges from white, pink, red, and purple and they produce rose hips in late summer. Some varieties, for instance, Frau Dagmar Hartopp, have quite ornamental large, bright orange rose hips and develop good foliage fall color. The hips are edible, a great source of vitamin C, and make tasty jellies and teas. It's best to wait until after a frost to pick the hips, this breaks down the cell wall and softens the hip. *Rugosa* roses are far more carefree than their hybrid relations, in fact spraying them often results in the death of the plant. They are very susceptible to herbicide damage, so don't spray Roundup close to this shrub. *Rugosas* aren't actually native to the US but have naturalized in some areas.



Rose "Fra Dagmar Hastrup" with rose hips. Photo: Margaret Hoffman, Penn State

What if you want to include fruit trees in the urban landscape? I would recommend using dwarf apple or pear trees. Dwarf fruit trees are ideal for areas with limited space and can be trained as espaliers along fences or simply small trees. For pruning information access the Extension publication [Pruning Apples and Pears in Home Fruit Plantings](#).



Dwarf apple trees are ideal for areas with limited space. Photos: Margaret Hoffman, Penn State

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