

A plant is native if it has occurred naturally for thousands of years in a region, ecosystem, or habitat without human introduction.

- The National Wildlife Federation

Native plants have evolved over thousands of years and are well adapted to the soil and changing climate of a local area. They provide food and shelter for insects, birds, small mammals, and countless soil microorganisms and are particularly effective at protecting water quality. Their deep and extensive networks of roots stabilize soils, infiltrate stormwater runoff, and filter excess nutrients carried by eroded sediments.

Choosing native plants

When selecting native plants for your shoreland, observing what grows in your local ecosystem can provide clues to inform your choices. Choose the “right plant for the right place” by matching the environmental factors on your site (sun/shade, wet/dry, soil type, etc.) with the preferred growing conditions of the plants you select.

The native shrubs and small trees highlighted below can be used as a starting point or foundation for your plantings. These woody plants are often recommended for erosion control and provide shelter and food for wildlife and nectar sources for pollinators. Plants associated with these foundation shrubs/small trees are listed as ASSOCIATES and are meant to fill additional vertical layers and provide diversity to your landscape, similar to what we see in naturally occurring communities.

Plants with an asterisk (*) may be difficult to source in Maine. Keystone native plants are noted and host a high diversity of caterpillars and native bee pollinators and are critical to the food web of healthy ecosystems.

Look for native plant sales at your local soil and water conservation district, Maine Audubon, Wild Seed Project, or other community groups.

Group 1: WET SHORELANDS

The gradual transition of the shoreline edge that extends from the waterbody to upland areas and is often hydric (very wet) with water levels that may fluctuate.



Speckled alder (*Alnus incana*) Full sun to part shade. 6-15 feet tall. Fixes nitrogen that can be used by plants. Forms dense thickets. **Associates:** gray birch (*Betula populifolia*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), meadowsweet (*Spiraea alba*), black willow (*Salix nigra*), pussy willow (*Salix discolor*), royal fern (*Osmunda regalis*), tussock sedge (*Carex stricta*), heart-leaved willow* (*Salix eriocephala*), purple-stemmed aster* (*Sympphyotrichum puniceum*)



Black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*) Full sun to part sun. 3-10 feet tall. White flowers in clusters from May to June followed by black berries that provide winter fruit for birds. Sends up suckers from roots to form colonies. Well adapted to both wet and dry conditions. **Associates:** red maple (*Acer rubrum*), large cranberry (*Vaccinium macrocarpon*), mountain holly (*Ilex mucronata*), cinnamon fern (*Osmundastrum cinnamomeum*), royal fern (*Osmunda regalis*)



Buttonbush (*Cephaelanthus occidentalis*) Full sun to part shade. 3-8 feet tall. Unusual spherical white flowers bloom in summer and are favored by bees and butterflies. Spreads by root suckers. **Associates:** winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), blue flag iris (*Iris versicolor*), cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), marsh fern (*Thelypteris palustris*)

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Sweetgale (*Myrica gale*) Full sun to part sun. 2-3 feet tall with blue-green leaves. Fragrant leaves and fruit similar to bayberry (a close relative). Fixes nitrogen. **Associates:** winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), speckled alder (*Alnus incana*), royal fern (*Osmunda regalis*), bluejoint* (*Calamagrostis canadensis*), purple-stemmed aster* (*Symphyotrichum puniceum*), swamp yellow-loosestrife* (*Lysimachia terrestris*)



Black willow (*Salix nigra*) Part sun to full shade. Up to 60 feet tall, the largest native willow and more common in the southern half of the state. Flowers in catkins appear after leaf out. A Keystone plant that hosts more than 250 caterpillars. **Associates:** red-osier dogwood (*Swida sericea*), buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*), cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*), swamp milkweed (*Asclepias incarnata* spp. *pulchra* is common in Maine)



White meadowsweet (*Spiraea alba*) Full sun to part shade. 2-5 feet tall. White-pink flowers in late summer attract many pollinators. **Associates:** highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), blue vervain (*Verbena hastata*), Virginia rose (*Rosa virginiana*), purple-stemmed aster* (*Symphyotrichum puniceum*), swamp yellow-loosestrife* (*Lysimachia terrestris*)



Red-osier dogwood (*Swida sericea*) Full sun to part shade. 3-8 feet tall. White flowers in flat round clusters from March to May. Spreads by branches that form roots when in contact with wet soil. Used frequently for live stakes. **Associates:** black willow (*Salix nigra*), speckled alder (*Alnus incana*), black elderberry (*Sambucus nigra* ssp *canadensis*), wrinkle-leaved goldenrod (*Solidago rugosa*)



Highbush blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*) Full sun to part sun. Up to 6-8 feet tall. Small white/green flowers in spring followed by blueberries. Grows best in acidic soil. A Keystone plant that hosts more than 200 caterpillars. **Associates:** summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*), blue flag iris (*Iris versicolor*), marsh fern (*Thelypteris palustris*), fringed sedge* (*Carex crinita*), lakeside sedge* (*Carex lacustris*)



Smooth arrowwood (*Viburnum dentatum*) Full sun to part shade. 6-10 feet tall. Spring white flowers in clusters followed by blue fruit in fall. **Associates:** red maple (*Acer rubrum*), gray birch (*Betula populifolia*), buttonbush (*Cephalanthus occidentalis*), steeplebush (*Spiraea tomentosa*), Virginia rose (*Rosa virginiana*), bluejoint* (*Calamagrostis canadensis*), purple-stemmed aster* (*Symphyotrichum puniceum*). Withe-rod or wild raisin (*Viburnum nudum*) is an alternative Viburnum for wetlands and shores.

Group 2: DRY SHORELANDS

Well-drained with little or no fluctuating water levels.



Sweet fern (*Comptonia peregrina*) Full sun to part sun. Up to 1-3 feet tall. Not a fern but a shrub. Leaves have herbal fragrance. Blooms June to July. Spreads with underground stems (rhizomes) to form colonies used by wildlife for shelter and nesting. Fixes nitrogen. **Associates:** common juniper (*Juniperus communis*), Northern bayberry (*Morella caroliniensis*), hay-scented fern (*Dennstaedtia punctilobula*), grass-leaved goldenrod (*Euthamia graminifolia*), little bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*), Indian grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*), switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*)



Common juniper (*Juniperus communis*) Full sun. Can be up to 6-12 feet tall but often low growing in Maine. Blue-green evergreen needles and cloudy blue berries. Resistant to deer browse. **Associates:** lowbush blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*), hay-scented fern (*Dennstaedtia punctilobula*), grass-leaved goldenrod (*Euthamia graminifolia*), switch grass (*Panicum virgatum*), wild sarsaparilla* (*Aralia nudicaulis*)



Lowbush blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*) Full sun to part shade. Often less than one foot tall. White, bell-shaped flowers in early June. Blueberries in July and August are most prolific when in full sun. Grows best in acidic soil. A Keystone plant. **Associates:** red bearberry (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*), black chokeberry (*Aronia melanocarpa*), bunchberry (*Chamaepericlymenum canadense*), Pennsylvania sedge (*Carex pensylvanica*), white wood-aster (*Eurybia divaricata*), large-leaved wood-aster (*Eurybia macrophylla*), grass-leaved goldenrod (*Euthamia graminifolia*)

Apps and websites for plant ID and growing conditions

PlantNet An app that allows you to identify plants by photographing them with your phone.

iNaturalist An app that helps you identify the plants and animals around you while generating data for science and conservation.

Garden Plant Finder (Native Plant Trust). An excellent database to search for the right plants for your conditions, based on New England ecoregions, exposure, moisture, bloom season and many others. There are three Level III ecoregions in Maine: Northeastern Highlands, Northeastern Coastal Zone and Acadian Plains and Hills.

Maine Native Plant Finder (Maine Audubon). A Maine-based searchable database.

GoBotany (Native Plant Trust). Includes a Simple Key with 1,200 of the most common species in New England. Aimed at beginners and professionals, it works by the user answering questions to narrow a list of matching plant selections. Comprehensive species pages allow you to learn about habitats, characteristics and uses of plants, and view photos and maps of distributions.

Sources of native plants

Where to Buy Native Plants – Source list on Wild Seed Project website

Local Native Plant Nurseries – Source list on Wild Ones Midcoast Maine website

Navigating the Nurseries: A Resource Guide – Wild Seed Project

In addition, there are many plant sales across Maine each year coordinated by organizations promoting native plants such as Maine Audubon, Wild Ones Midcoast, and Wild Seed Project.

Other native plant resources

Cumberland County Soil and Water Conservation District. 2017. Coastal Planting Guide: Planting for Slope Stabilization on Maine's Coastal Bluffs.

Gawler, Sue and Bouchard, Jack. 2021. Common Shrubs of Central Maine Shorelines.

Lorimer, Uli. 2022. The Northeast Native Plant Primer: 235 Plants for an Earth-Friendly Garden. Timber Press, Inc.

Maine DEP. 2024 (in progress). Our Shore Guide.

Maine Natural Areas Program. Natural Community Fact Sheets.

Portland Water District/Maine DEP. Conservation Practices for Homeowners: Planting and Maintaining Buffers (updated fact sheet)

Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation. Regional Pollinator-Friendly Native Plant Lists.

Scan here for more information



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