



Fact Sheet

Fact Sheet 727

RIPARIAN BUFFER MANAGEMENT UNDERSTORY PLANTS FOR RIPARIAN FOREST BUFFERS

The following tables list understory trees and shrubs appropriate for riparian forest buffers. Understory trees and shrubs are tolerant to shade and are an important structural component of any forest. Some shrubs, such as rhododendron and some blueberries are also adapted to the low-light conditions of the forest understory, but more are adapted to the buffer's edge. The edge might be next to the water or next to an upland area. Most of the shrubs listed prefer moist growing conditions and are good choices for areas that filter water flow. Shrubs that prefer drier sites

include witch hazel, grey dogwood, and rose-bay rhododendron.

Including understory trees and shrubs in a riparian forest buffer planting increases the structural diversity of the buffer by providing layers of vegetation. This increases biodiversity and enhances both the water quality and wildlife habitat attractiveness of the buffer.

REFERENCES

U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service. 1997. *Chesapeake Bay Riparian Handbook*.

Other Fact Sheets in the Riparian Buffer Series:

- | | |
|--------|---|
| FS 724 | An Introduction to the Riparian Forest Buffer |
| FS 725 | Buffer Design, Establishment, and Maintenance |
| FS 726 | Trees for Riparian Forest Buffers |
| FS 728 | Grasses for Riparian Buffers and Wildlife Habitat Improvement |
| FS 729 | Soil Bioengineering or Streambank Restoration for Riparian Forest Buffers |
| FS 733 | Riparian Buffer Systems |

Riparian Buffer Management: Trees for Riparian Forest Buffers
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P97/V98

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, University of Maryland, College Park, and local governments. Thomas A. Fretz, Director of Maryland Cooperative Extension, University of Maryland.

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Riparian Understory Shrubs

Region		Wildlife Value	Light Preference	Flood Tolerance	Growth Rate	Deciduous/Evergreen	Rooting
Coastal plain (CP) Piedmont (P) Mountains (M)		V. high High Medium Low	○▶●	High Medium Low	V. fast Fast Medium Slow		
Arrowwood viburnum	CP, P, M	Medium	○▶	Medium	Medium	Deciduous	Shallow
Bayberry	CP	High	○	High	Medium	Deciduous/ Evergreen	Shallow
Blackhaw	P, M	High	○▶	High	Medium	Deciduous	Shallow
Buttonbush	CP, P, M	Medium-High	○▶	High	Medium	Deciduous	Shallow
Common ninebark	CP, P	Medium	○	High	Fast	Deciduous	Shallow
Elderberry	CP, P, M	V. high	○▶	High	Fast	Deciduous	Shallow
Grey dogwood	P, M	V. high	○▶	Low	Medium	Deciduous	Shallow
Highbush blueberry	CP, P	V. high	○▶	High	Slow	Deciduous	Shallow
Inkberry	CP	High	○▶	High	Slow	Evergreen	Shallow
Maple-leaf viburnum	P, M	High	▶●	Low	Medium-Slow	Deciduous	Shallow
Pinxterbloom azalea	CP, P	Low	▶●	High	Slow	Deciduous	Shallow
Possumhaw	P, M	High	○▶	High	Medium	Deciduous	Shallow
Pussy willow	P, M	Medium	○	Medium	Fast	Deciduous	Shallow
Red chokeberry	CP	Medium	○▶	High	Slow	Deciduous	Shallow
Red osier dogwood	CP, P, M	High	○▶	High	Fast	Deciduous	Shallow
Rosebay rhododendron	CP, P, M	Low	▶●	Low	Slow	Evergreen	Shallow
Silky dogwood	P, M	High	○▶	Medium	Fast	Deciduous	Shallow (good bank stabilizer)

Wildlife Value = food source for wildlife

Light Preference: ○ = full sunlight

▶ = partial shade

● = shade

Flood Tolerance: High = tolerates flooding/high water
Low = does not tolerate flooding/high water

Riparian Understory Shrubs (continued)

Region	Wildlife Value	Light Preference	Flood Tolerance	Growth Rate	Deciduous/ Evergreen	Rooting
Coastal plain (CP) Piedmont (P) Mountains (M)	V. high High Medium Low	○ ●●	High Medium Low	V. fast Fast Medium Slow		
Smooth alder	Medium	○/●	High	Medium-Fast	Deciduous	Shallow
Speckled alder	Medium	○	High	Fast	Deciduous	Shallow
Spicebush	V. high	●/●	Medium	Fast	Deciduous	Deep lateral
Swamp azalea	Low	○/●	High	Medium	Deciduous	Shallow
Swamp leucothoe	Low	●/●	Medium	Slow	Evergreen	Shallow
Sweet pepperbush	High	○/●	High	Medium	Deciduous	Shallow
Virginia sweetspire	Low	○/●	High	Medium-Slow	Deciduous	Shallow
Winterberry	High	○/●	High	Slow	Deciduous	Shallow (seasonally flooded areas)
Witch-hazel	Low	○/●	Low	Medium	Deciduous	Deep lateral

Wildlife Value = food source for wildlife

Light Preference: ○ = full sunlight

● = partial shade

●● = shade

Flood Tolerance: High = tolerates flooding/high water

Low = does not tolerate flooding/high water

Riparian Understory Trees

Region	Wildlife Value	Light Preference	Flood Tolerance	Growth Rate	Height (feet)	Rooting
Coastal plain (CP) Piedmont (P) Mountains (M)	V. high High Medium Low	○ ● ○ ● ○ ● ○ ●	High Medium Low	V. fast Fast Medium Slow	>75' 50-75' <50'	
American holly	High	●	Medium-Low	Slow	30-40'	Taproot
American hornbeam	Medium-High	●/●	Medium-Low	Slow	30-40'	Deep lateral
Boxelder	Medium	○	High	V. fast	>50'	Deep lateral
Flowering Dogwood	Medium	○/●	Low	Slow	30-40'	Shallow
Hawthorn	High	○	Low-Medium	Medium	<30'	Shallow
Hophornbeam	Medium	○/●	Low	Slow	<30'	Shallow
Pawpaw	V. high	●/●	Low-Medium	Slow	30-40'	Deep lateral
Persimmon	V. high-High	○	Medium	Slow	<50'	Deep taproot
Redbud	Medium	●	High	Slow	<50'	Shallow
Sassafras	High	○	Low	Fast	<50'	Shallow
Shad-bush	High	●/●	High	Slow	30-40'	Shallow
Sweet bay magnolia	V. low-Low	●	Medium	Medium	<30'	Deep lateral

Wildlife Value = food source for wildlife

Light Preference: ○ = full sunlight

● = partial shade

● = shade

Flood Tolerance: High = tolerates flooding/high water

Low = does not tolerate flooding/high water