

# Landscaping with low-growing native plants

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**VALLE  
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Gardener

Today we continue our list of native landscaping assets, spotlighting low-growing shrubs and groundcovers. There are many, but this time we are showcasing berried plants which provide food as well as cover for birds and other mammals (including humans, of course).

Our pictured illustration, Oregon grape, can be unimpressive growing alone, but when grouped in clumps of three or more — perhaps at the base of an evergreen, which are notoriously averse to plants around their roots. The dusty blue-violet berries are not tasty as is, but are nonetheless edible, and so pectin-filled that they make an outstanding self-jelling jelly, enhanced by the addition of a little apple or citrus juice. High in Vitamin C, the berries were once used to treat scurvy.

As a landscape plant, both the low- and tall-growing *Berberis* are worthwhile. They grow in poor soil, which is often not welcoming to ornamentals. The early blooming flowers welcome the first insects and pollinators, and are a pretty and sweet-scented asset where tough conditions are the norm. Later, birds and squirrels eat the berries, and shelter among the leaves. Walkway and path edges, traffic areas and hard-to-grow spaces are perfect for Oregon grape, which asks only partial sun and an occasional watering. Spring planting seems most successful, simply transplanting healthy pieces of rootstock. Best news? Deer rarely browse this plant!

As a rocky site companion, Oregon grape combines beautifully with a number of natives, most especially Shrubby Penstemon, the large smoky-blue flowers of which complement the *Berberis*' dusky berries.

Other great base-growers are Thimbleberry and



**Oregon Grape (*Berberis* - formerly *Mahonia*) can be an impressive addition to native landscaping, especially when grown in groups of three or more.**

Kinnikinnick, both of which are also tolerated in the dryness under and near pines, and Dewberry (trailing blackberry - *Rubus*). This latter, while sporting nasty, foot-tangling, needled vines, is also ideal for slopes or open areas where you don't want anyone intruding. (You will welcome the small but delectable black berries in the early autumn, however).

To a lesser degree, wild strawberry (*Fragaria*) can tolerate the same dry site conditions, but needs a bit more moisture to be truly fruitful. As with all natives, all of the afore-mentioned love our naturally acidic soil. The most versatile of these four is probably the thimbleberry (*Rubus parviflorus*) which is found thriving in moist sites as well as dry. In the landscape it can be invasive, but if you have a large area to cover, it might be just the ticket.

Don't forget the native species of roses — *Rosa gymnocarpa* (baldhip rose); *R. nutkana* (Nootka rose); *R. woodsii* (Woods or pearhip rose) — which not only regale the surroundings with fragrance, but provide leafy, thorny shelter followed by nutritious rosehips for winter food. When people speak of natives as "not offering floral beauty" I can only refer them to the wild roses. They bloom

early and lavishly in nearly every habitat high and low. You'll find them with Aspen, among firs, cottonwoods, and with other shrubs from Ocean Spray to huckleberry, in moist and dry ecosystems — a truly lovely, hardy and versatile ornamental shrub.

One of my particularly beloved shrubs is *Lonicera utahensis* (shrub honeysuckle) often called Twinberry, and the very first bloomer in my wild landscape in the spring. Its small tubular twin flowers seem to wake the slumbering bumblebees (*Bombus Bombus*) who sleepily rouse from their winter's underground sleep and feed on the blossoms. Every Spring as things slowly warm up, I check the three-bush clump daily with my binoculars, mentally calling the big, fuzzy, wonderful bees. Within a day or two of bloom, I'll see a branch suddenly pull steeply downward, and sure enough, it's the big heavy bumblebee getting his restorative spring tonic. Later, the pretty little bells turn to berries, and then it's the birds' turn. Twinberry grows nicely in a landscape with Snowberry and Mountain Lover (*Pachistima*) — a lovely shrub threesome in most any kind of habitat.

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You can track down many of these wonderful gifts of nature for your own landscaping: Check with our own area nurseries/greenhouses, many of which carry wild and native species. Nursery-raised stock has been bred to be used in domestic conditions and they'll often stand a better chance of making it especially if you already have non-native shrubs and ornamentals growing on your property. While they thrive in acidic natural soil, they can adapt to your surroundings gradually.

Best of all, native plants, once established, want nor need no special care, no fertilizers — ever! no pesticides — ever! They give freely of their beauty, their bounty and their hardiness. Once established, all you have to do is harvest what you want and leave the rest for the birds!

### **Transplanting Rules:**

If you come across an area rich in small trees or shrubs that you covet, there are hard and fast rules for collecting wild plants.

Our forests and meadows are being abused in many ways and many plants are being endangered and even destroyed.

Wildcrafting, once a respected way of collecting, has been abused by many who rip out beargrass for the strappy leaves which they dry for florists' bouquets. Pipsissewa, or Prince's Pine, which seems almost indestructible, was wiped out in places by wreathmaker gatherers.

Many of us have gone out on a huckleberry excursion to find entire hillsides of our "secret" spots covered with hordes of people with giant coolers full of berries stacked in campgrounds. Often pickers are sitting in camp pulling berries off bushes they pulled up for easier picking!

I have found glades of baby firs, aspens, Mountain ash, or other trees or shrubs, full of holes where someone has dug them all out, probably for resale. Don't be one of those!

Purchase when you can, but follow the rules of thumb if collecting any wild plants you want in your landscape.

- **One out of 20** - If there are only a few specimens, leave them to mature and enlarge their habitat for a season or two; if there are many, take "one out of 20" to ensure survival of those remaining:

- **Like Site** - This means to observe the conditions (dry, moist, sandy, rocky, coniferous, etc.), and plant in a site as close as possible. Too, tie a ribbon on the north side of small trees and plant facing in the same direction at home;

- **Plenty of Soil** - Regardless what you dig, make sure you get all the roots, and plenty of surrounding duff and native nourishment to give it a good start. Fill in the holes!

- **Plan Immediate planting** - Have your site and hole ready at home for planting (with plenty of water) upon arrival for less shock;

- **Never** take the only one of anything!

Help keep our troubled environment healthy and pristine.