

Gardening Basics

Shrubs

Shrubs form the backdrop - the foundation - for all the rest of the landscape. They also provide birds and other creatures excellent food and shelter. And they can be real stunners on their own, if selected and placed with care. Mid-October to late January is the best time to plant shrubs so let's beautify your landscape with these versatile plants.



"American Elderberry", Liz Moyer, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, Denton County MGA

Site Planning

Shrubs are generally planted in an existing bed but look carefully at the bed and where you want the shrubs to be. It's best to provide an 18-24" gap between any structures and the shrubs, thus providing room to get around them for maintenance. Another good practice is to look out the windows of your home and select plantings to give a pleasing view from the inside looking out.

Today's most attractive landscapes are a far cry from the lines of privets common with new build "landscapes". We now strive for a sense of natural growth, so plant shrubs in odd numbered groups or drifts – not in a straight line around the foundation. Use a variety of shrubs in each group to avoid disease problems and provide biodiversity. The result will be much more than "fillers". Consider the reasons for the shrubs: Are you trying to fill a specific space, conceal an unappealing feature or add more beauty? As a shrub alternative, could you use a large bunch grass or a vine on a trellis? Or a boulder with grasses planted around it? Your decisions can totally change the look and maintenance of a landscape.

Selection

A little research before selecting your plants will make a huge difference! Pay attention to the plant's sunlight and watering requirements so you achieve 'right plant, right place'. While researching take notes about the species of interest and those to be avoided. There are two major issues to be considered:

1. Will this plant grow to provide the features I value – beauty, low maintenance, shelter and food for wildlife and pollinators, and importantly, at its mature size will it be the right fit in my yard?

2. Is this plant likely to be invasive? Many common shrubs are identified as invasive species by TexasInvasives.org meaning they are harmful to our environment, with the following characteristics:



"American Beautyberries 1 - Purdis Creek" by awsheffield is licensed under CC BY 2.0.

- Flourish and spread aggressively outside of their native range, choking out native species on which wildlife depend
- Almost always are introduced species (not native to the area)
- Decrease natural biodiversity
- Costly to prevent, monitor and control when they spread from their original location

Two lists of shrubs well-suited to our soils and climate in North Texas are:

1. The Native Plant Society of Texas, Trinity Forks chapter: - list of shrubs native to Denton County: <https://npsot.org/wp/trinityforks/files/2022/08/10-Shrubs-Native-to-Denton-08-04-2022.pdf>

See multiple lists from NPSOT of all types that will thrive in North Texas: <https://npsot.org/wp/trinityforks/plant-lists/>

2. AgriLife Earth-Kind Plant Selector: <http://ekps.tamu.edu/> (use Region B or enter your zip code) Each species has a link that gives additional info for the plant including an Earth-Kind rating from 1-10, so ensure your picks are on the positive end. **Note** that this site does include some very hardy but invasive species, so check your selections at TexasInvasives.org

Here are some shrubs of the many recommended by the websites above:



"Yaupon holly", Barbara Brown, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0, Denton County MGA

- American Beautyberry, *Callicarpa americana* – graceful arching stems produce clusters of tiny white flowers in spring, white berries in summer turn bright fuchsia in early fall. Seeds and berries are important bird food and deer like the foliage. Can be cut back in early spring if needed. Deciduous.
- Coralberry, *Symphoricarpos orbiculatus* – graceful arching branches produces roundish leaves for a delicate texture and small coral pin to purple berries in winter. Can be cut back in early spring, if needed, for control. Deciduous
- Flame Acanthus, *Anisacanthus quadrifidus var. wrightii* – butterfly and pollinator magnet! Bright red blooms mid-summer to first freeze. Cut back in early spring, if needed, for control. Deciduous
- Pavonia or Rock Rose, *Pavonia lasiopetala* – small pink hibiscus-like flowers on long arching branches. Needs some control to stay in its space. Water intermittently to promote blooming during drought conditions. Cut back in winter to promote bushiness. Mildew is minor and unavoidable and should be tolerated. Deciduous
- Texas Sage or Cenizo or Purple Sage, *Leucophyllum frutescens* – silvery to greenish small leaves with pinkish to purple blooms intermittently spring to fall. In winter selectively prune to shape if needed. Does not like wet feet so do not overwater. Is susceptible to cotton root rot. Do not fertilize. Little maintenance required. Evergreen
- Autumn Sage, *Salvia greggii* – tough mounding shrub, flowering from spring to first frost, available colors from red, purple, pinks to white. Prune in winter to promote bushiness. Evergreen in mild winters.
- Rosemary, *Rosmarinus officinalis* – upright shrub with fragrant leaves used in cooking. May need to be pruned to maintain shape and size. Drought resistant and thrives in poor, rocky soil with excellent drainage. Roots will rot when overwatered. Prostrate cultivars have trailing stems useful for draping over retaining walls, etc. Evergreen.
- Common Elderberry, *Sambucus nigra ssp. Canadensis*– large shrub, over 6' tall and wide with large white flower clusters in spring and dark purple edible berries in late summer. Berries are used for syrup, jelly, or wine. Drops leaves under extremely dry conditions and then re-grows them rapidly. Plant evergreen in front of it. Deciduous.
- Agarita or Agarito, *Mahonia trifoliolata* – 3'-6' shrub with extremely sharp barbs on leaves so inadvisable for walkways/mailbox but good in a protective bed along a fence. Numerous yellow flowers in early spring followed by white, turning red, berries in mid-summer. Excellent food source and protection for birds. Evergreen
- Roughleaf Dogwood, *Cornus drummondii* – Clusters of creamy white flowers in spring produce berries in fall. Can be a shrub if multi-trunked or single trunk small tree. Blooms well in shade. Purplish leaf color in fall. Deciduous.
- Yaupon Holly, *Ilex vomitoria*– Also available as dwarf, weeping, and columnar forms. Produces beautiful form if left un-pruned. Female plants produce bright red berries in fall and winter. Excellent food source for birds. Evergreen.
- Turk's Cap, *Malvaviscus arboreus var. drummondii* – Hummingbird magnet with arching branches with red blooms all summer. Prune in order to control its habit. Useful for shade. Available in pink and white, also. Deciduous.
- Texas Mountain Laurel, *Sophora secundiflora* – Can be a multi-trunk shrub or small tree. Purple wisteria-like flower clusters that are known for their strong grape soda smell arrive in early spring followed by pods with red seeds. Seeds are toxic to animals and humans. Evergreen

The following shrubs are non-native, but are Earth-Kind selections and well worth a little garden space:

- Oak-leaf hydrangea, *Hydrangea quercifolia* – Large white pyramidal blooms in early summer, red/purple foliage in fall. Next year’s flower buds form on summer’s growth so prune, if needed, just after flowering (not in fall/winter). Plant in shade-or part shade. Deciduous
- Dwarf pomegranate, *Punica granatum var. nana* –Single red-orange flowers set fruit prolifically. Fall color can sometimes be a nice yellow. May freeze to the ground in very low temps but come back from roots. Deciduous
- Bay Laurel or Sweet Bay, *Laurus nobilis* – The classic laurel used to fashion victory wreaths for ancient Greeks and Romans. Handsome upright shrub that varies in size . Use leaves to flavor stews and other meat dishes. Evergreen

The following plants are commonly sold but are listed on one or more invasive plant lists and **should be avoided**:

- Chinese / European Privet, *Ligustrum sinense/L. vulgare* L. – listed by [USDA Forest Service](#) and the “Invasive Plant Atlas of the US”
- Japanese / Glossy Privet, *Ligustrum japonicum/L. lucidum*Ait. f. – listed by [USDA Forest Service](#) and the “Invasive Plant Atlas of the US”
- Nandina or Sacred Bamboo, *Nandina domestica*– listed by [USDA Forest Service](#) and “Invasive Plant Atlas of the US”
- The following 4 bush honeysuckles – listed by [USDA Forest Service](#):
Amur honeysuckle, *Lonicera maackii* (Rupr.) Herder Tatarian honeysuckle, *Lonicera tartaric* L.
Morrow’s honeysuckle, *Lonicera morrowii* Gray Sweet-breath-of-spring, *Lonicera fragrantissima* Lindl. & Paxton

Picking a Shrub at the Nursery

Depending on the species you want, “good” shrubs are available from numerous sources if you take the time to evaluate them. Criteria for shrubs are much the same as with a tree, although many shrubs have multi-trunks. Texas A&M AgriLife has good tips at <http://texastreeplanting.tamu.edu/PickTreeAtNursery.html>. The accompanying video is also a good reference. Keep in mind pulling a shrub out of its pot to check the condition is very important. If a retailer doesn’t want you to do this or it has severely girdled roots, don’t buy that shrub. Shrubs are generally sold in pot sizes from 1 to 10 gallons. In general, it is better to plant a larger shrub. Shrubs will make an immediate impact on your landscape.

Planting

Returning, once again to the AgriLife website, at <http://texastreeplanting.tamu.edu/PlantTreeProperly.html>, there are several points to remember when planting the shrub.

- Most important is proper watering. Watering of about a gallon is necessary once a week. In hot, dry periods this may increase to twice per week. Native plants also require this watering to recover from the transplant shock and get their root systems going. This should be maintained for the first two years after planting until they are ready to survive on rainwater alone.
- Group plants together that have the same sunlight and watering requirements.
- The hole depth and width are important to establish the shrub properly and not too deeply.
- Refilling the hole with the same soil that was removed also helps establish the shrub. If the hole is terribly sticky clay, you may need to amend the entire bed with organic matter before proceeding.
- Mulch retains moisture and slows weed development around the shrub. It should not touch the shrub but be at least 4 inches from all trunks. If not, the moist environment against the bark encourages disease and pests.
- Trimming during the first year of a newly planted shrub should be limited to removal of dead or broken limbs.
- While nurseries will plant shrubs all year round (particularly potted shrubs), for its optimum establishment planting should be done when the shrub is dormant (late fall through early spring). Roots grow well in cool weather.

Pruning

After their first growing season, shrubs may need a little pruning in the late fall/winter for aesthetic purposes. Using good bypass action pruning shears (not hedge clippers), selectively remove branches as needed. There are excellent instructions at <https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/landscape/proper-pruning-techniques/> (scroll for the ‘Pruning Shrubs’ section). If the shrub is already too big for its location, consider moving it. Most shrubs have a mature size provided at plant information sites or tags and if you plant properly, you shouldn’t have this problem, but occasionally they outgrow our expectations. With proper planning, selection and planting, the shrub will become a star in your landscape. Spend a little time now for big payback later.

Resources:

Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center: <https://www.wildflower.org/plants/>

Native Plant Society of Texas, Trinity Forks chapter, Plant Lists: <https://npsot.org/wp/trinityforks/plant-lists/>

North Carolina State Extension, Plant Toolbox: https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/find_a_plant/

Texas A&M University, Earth-Kind, Proper Pruning Techniques:
<https://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/earthkind/landscape/proper-pruning-techniques/>

Texas A&M University, Tree Planting Guide: <https://texastreeplanting.tamu.edu/PickTreeAtNursery.html>

Texas A&M University, Earth-Kind Landscaping: <http://ekps.tamu.edu/>

Texas Invasives: https://texasinvasives.org/invasives_database/

USDA Forest Service, Non-native Invasive Plants of Southern Forests: <https://www.invasive.org/eastern/srs/>