

Some Native Plant Suggestions

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Gardeners new to native landscaping often wonder which plants they should add to their project. The answer depends on many factors including the site's soil composition, drainage, and amount of direct sunlight. This article spotlights a few species worth considering. All of them are native to Fairfax County, readily available from a reputable nursery (not necessarily a hardware or big box store's garden center), moderately to easily grown, and often overlooked during the plant selection process.

Tree: Chestnut Oak (*Quercus prinus*)

Chestnut oaks used to be more abundant than they are today, the loss attributed to habitat destruction. It is a grand shade tree with deeply furrowed, ornate bark. Though unrelated to chestnuts, this oak's leaves resemble its common namesake. This tree needs excellent drainage and is often seen growing along slopes and elevated land.

Shrub: Northern Highbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*)

Many people consider blueberries a mere food item without realizing this bush has year-around attractions. In the spring, cream-colored bell-shaped flowers adorn the branches. The succulent berries mature in the summer, providing food for humans and birds. The autumn foliage blazes in scarlet. Reddish to pinkish branches highlight the winterscape. For best berry production, purchase at least two bushes, either wild types or two or more unique cultivars, and plant them near each other. Other blueberry species to consider include the southern highbush (*V. formosum*) and New Jersey blueberries (*V. caesariense*).



Figure 1. This fallen chestnut oak leaf (A) bears a resemblance to its namesake. The trunk (B) is covered by intensely textured bark. Notable northern highbush blueberries features include (C) bell flowers and (D) ruby autumn foliage.

Ornamental Grass: Little Bluestem (*Schizachyrium scoparium*)

After discovering this gem, folks will likely forgo those non-native *Miscanthus* grasses sold everywhere! Sea green blades adorn the little bluestem during the growing season. In autumn, the grass acquires burgundy tones before drying into golden stalks. Keep those husks up throughout winter since small birds love eating the fuzzy seeds.

Forb—Sunny Location: Blue False Indigo (*Baptisia australis*)

Deep, purplish-blue flowers are this plant's hallmark feature. Blossoming in mid- to late spring, it provides food for many of the bee species suffering population declines. The flowers develop into pods, which can be left after they open and dry out for fall and winter enrichment. As a legume, false indigo's root nodules contain nitrogen-fixing bacteria, so biologically-available nitrogen is added to the soil. Unlike non-native invasive leguminous vines such as [wisteria](#), [crown vetch](#), and [kudzu](#), false indigo forms well-behaved clumps.

Forb—Shaded Location: Heart-leaved Foamflower (*Tiarella cordifolia*)

Vast native wildflower species carpet Virginia's forest floors, many of which are wonderful spring ephemerals [see [The Spring Edition of What's That Plant](#) (March 2012)]. Foamflowers also bloom in the spring, but keep their striking leaves throughout most of the year. Gardeners might use foamflower as a hardy ornamental specimen or as a groundcover. Even more importantly, beneficial pollinators seek the blossoms for nourishment and other critters shelter under its leaves.

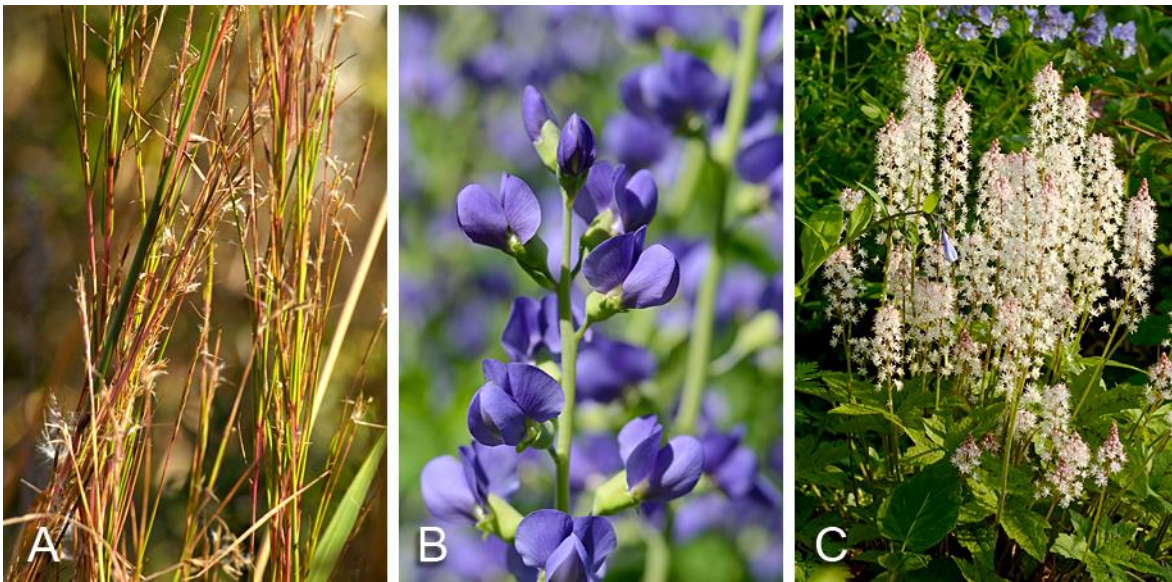


Figure 2. By mid-autumn, little bluestem's 2-3 foot blades (A) take on a maroon and gold coloration as seed tufts begin emerging. With stems reaching 3 feet high, false indigo blossoms (B) will enhance any sunny garden. Foamflowers (C) add charm to woodland plots while helping wildlife. Several cultivars are available with slightly different flowers, leaf shapes, and spreading speeds. Most flower stalks top at 6-14 inches.

Forb—By Stepping Stones: Partridgeberry (*Mitchella repens*) and Woodland Stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*)

Plants around stepping stones need to be both short and tough. Many "stepable" garden center plants are non-natives, such as sedums from the Mediterranean region or Irish-moss (*Sagina subulata*, which is not even a real moss). A native perfect for the job in shaded locations is partridgeberry. The deep, evergreen foliage accents the walkway while the pretty white flowers provide pollinators with a sip of nectar. The red, edible (though tasteless) berries add interest in the autumn and winter until gobbled up by wildlife. Virginia has three native *Sedum* species and woodland stonecrop is the only one native to Fairfax County. As the name suggests, it thrives along stony terrains like Great Falls and prefers bright light. Woodland stonecrop's star-like white, springtime flowers attract butterflies. This plant is easily propagated by snipping off segments and sticking them into the ground, with the best results in spring. Many plants share the "stonecrop" common name, so be sure to confirm the scientific name before purchasing it.

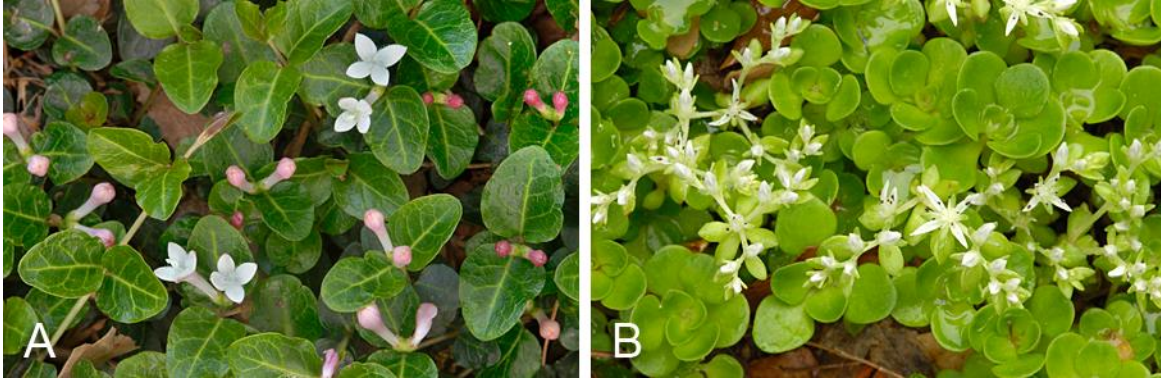


Figure 3. White flowers appear in both partridgeberries (A) and woodland stonecrop (B). Partridgeberries always bloom with floral doublets.

For more ideas, check out [Native Plants for Northern Virginia](#), available in print and online—an excellent book to get you started! Many authors, photographers, organizations, and agencies collaborated to produce this highly informative and user-friendly book. It catalogs and discusses more native species, suggests plants for different landscaping conditions, lists non-native invasive species to avoid, and provides a slew of additional resources. [Native Plants for Wildlife Habitat and Conservation Landscaping: Chesapeake Bay Watershed](#) by Britt E. Slattery et al. (2003) is another hardcopy and downloadable book. This one has a more extensive native plant list catering towards the broader Mid-Atlantic states. For Virginia native plants ideal in conservation, restoration, and landscape projects, visit www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural_heritage/nativeplants.shtml. Happy gardening!

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