



High Value Generalist Plants for Every Garden: Understory Trees and Shrubs

Most of our native songbirds prefer to nest, roughly, 5 feet to 15 feet off the ground – that is in shrubs and small trees. More than just nesting habitat, many of our smaller woody species produce valuable fruits and berries, nuts, and flowers that attract pollinators.

In a natural arrangement, expect to see more shrub density along edges of forests or opening where there is more light, and a more open structure in full shade. Underplanting shrubs and small trees around existing canopy trees won't harm them as long as you follow basic precautions: avoid disturbing or cutting large roots, leave some areas undisturbed, and phase in your plantings over time. To further reduce stress on your trees and shrubs, mulch properly (no volcanoes!), reduce lawn around them, and water them during periods of drought.

- *Cornus florida* (Flowering Dogwood) – can tolerate a wide range of conditions, but Anthracnose (a fungal disease) has killed many in humid shady environments. Err on the side of dry to well-drained forest edges and other areas where they get some direct sun to be safe.
- *Viburnum dentatum* (Arrowwood Viburnum) – a shrub of mesic to wet forests and forest edges.
- *Viburnum acerifolium* (Maple-leaf Viburnum) – a shrub of mesic to dry forests and forest edges. Somewhat slower growing and more susceptible to deer browse than *V. dentatum*.
- *Viburnum prunifolium* (Blackhaw Viburnum) – a small tree common throughout a wide range of forest types.
- *Carpinus caroliniana* (Ironwood/Hornbeam) – a common understory tree of dry-mesic to wet forests and edges. Despite a reputation for growing slowly, we find it grows rapidly when young.
- *Corylus americana* (Hazelnut) – grows in a wide range of forests and forest edges from dry slopes down to swamps. In sunny spots tends to be shrubbier, but in shady areas can form a taller single trunk. Nuts are edible but be sure to leave some for the large birds and various mammals that need them too!
- *Euonymus americanus* (Strawberry Bush) – while wild populations are heavily suppressed by deer browse, these once-ubiquitous shrubs grow quickly and densely in protected areas or if given protection like caging.