

Trees & Shrubs for Interior Alaska

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I don't know when the first avid gardener came to Fairbanks, or maybe grew up here, but there have been enthusiastic, adventuresome and talented gardeners here for many years. Last spring we decided to make use of all those cumulative years of experience from local gardeners, commercial growers, and researchers, and to compile a comprehensive list of plants that have been grown here. This is so that we will have a ready answer when we hear the often asked questions "What can you grow in Fairbanks?" or "What trees and shrubs can I use to landscape my property?" This compilation is an continuing process -- we are seeking more input and the checklist will be updated yearly. Copies of the *Checklist of Landscape Plant Materials for the Tanana Valley* (Georgeson Botanical Notes No. 2) can be requested from Publications, AFES, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, AK 99775-0080.

The checklist is divided into three sections: 1) reliable -- plants thoroughly tested and with reasonable care should grow well; 2) challenging -- plants which may require a special site or special care to do well; and 3) worth testing -- plants which one or more individuals have grown successfully, but need more testing.

The following is a description of a few of the trees and shrubs on the list, including some of the less familiar ones.

***Acer ginnala* Amur maple**

One of the few maples that grows here in the Interior, the Amur maple, is a multi-stemmed shrub or small tree with a vase-like to rounded outline. The shape can be altered by pruning. It is adaptable to a wide range of soils and pH, but performs best in moist, well drained soil. This maple requires a good location as it can suffer some winter injury in a severe winter.

Amur maple is one of the first trees to leaf out in the spring. It has yellowish white, fragrant flowers. If you're interested in attracting wildlife, seeds are eaten by various birds and flying squirrels. It has outstanding fall color, although they say the color is variable, so you should select for this trait. Best coloration occurs in a full sun situation. It is suitable to small spaces, can be used as a specimen plant, in groups or for massing, for hedging or screening.

***Amelanchier alnifolia* Saskatoon, serviceberry**

Serviceberry has showy spring blooms. The species has been developed for commercial fruit production and is more widely used in Canada than the U.S. It is attractive to birds as well as humans. This is a large shrub, and tends to be stoloniferous, which means some varieties sucker extensively. It tolerates a wide range of pH, prefers a sunny site, and has attractive fall color. Named varieties are Northline, Pembina, Regent and Smoky.

***Cornus (Suida) stolonifera* Red-osier dogwood**

This dogwood is native to Alaska. It is a multistemmed shrub with a broad, rounded, spreading form. It spreads freely by underground stems, hence the name *stolonifera*. The flowers are attractive and the stem color is brilliant red -- really striking in the winter landscape. Recommendations in the literature say to prune to the ground every few years in order to maintain stem color and reasonable height. The ornamental white fruits attract birds and it has a beautiful fall color.

Red-osier dogwood is extremely adaptable to a wide range of soil and climatic conditions. In the wild it is found in moist spots and along streams. It can be used as a shrub border, for massing, and makes an effective bank cover because the underground stems hold soil in place.

There is also a form with variegated leaves, but it may not be hardy in the Fairbanks area.

***Cotoneaster acutifolia* Peking cotoneaster**

This shrub is native to Mongolia, China, and the Himalayas. It has lustrous dark green leaves, somewhat insignificant flowers, and berry-like black fruits. It has a rounded shape and can be somewhat stiff, especially if pruned. This is a dense plant that makes a good screen or massing plant. It has striking red fall color and can be pruned to form hedges, formal shapes, topiary or espaliered against fences or buildings.

***Crataegus succulenta* Fleshy hawthorn**

This deciduous shrub or small tree is a member of the rose family. The fruit is a small pome (apple-like). It prefers a sunny location and rich, loamy soil that is not acid. Another hawthorn, *Crataegus rivularis*, has flowers that are not quite as showy, but has good fall color.

***Elaeagnus commutata* Silverberry**

This native plant is found on dry slopes and gravel bars. It has a somewhat erect habit, spreads by suckers and forms colonies. Its fragrant yellow tubular flowers are produced in the leaf axils. The small silvery egg-shaped fruits are attractive to birds. The silverberry's outstanding feature is the leaves, which are covered with silvery white scales, and offer a nice contrast to other leaf colors. It can be used as a hedge. It likes full sun, and is good for dry and exposed sites.

***Forsythia ovata* 'Nakai' Forsythia**

Almost everyone who has lived in the "lower 48" will recognize the yellow flowers of the forsythia as harbingers of spring. Unfortunately we can't grow anything quite as impressive as the bush shown in this slide in Fairbanks, but we have finally found this variety, which will bloom reliably (but fairly close to the ground) in the Interior. This species originated in Korea, is the earliest flowering species and has the the hardiest flower buds. The hardiness of the flower buds is the critical factor,

as most other varieties of forsythia survive here, but do not flower.

***Larix siberica* Siberian larch or tamarack**

This tree has a soft green pyramidal form with fine textured needles. It grows in wet or dry sites. It has a high tolerance for acidic soils, moderate tolerance for shade and grows fastest in full sun. The larch has an attractive yellow to gold fall color. Its seeds provide food for a variety of birds and squirrels.

***Lonicera tatarica* Tatarian honeysuckle**

***L. caerulea* Sweetberry honeysuckle**

Tatarian honeysuckle has a broad rounded arching form, with attractive flowers. There are many named cultivars, including 'Arnold Red' and 'Zabellii' with red flowers, and 'Alba' and 'Beavermore' with white flowers. All of these have red berries, which are used by birds. This is a low-maintenance plant for sun or part shade. It is useful for screening, hedges or massing.

One cultivar of the sweetberry honeysuckle (*L. caerulea*) grown at the Botanical Garden has a neat, low rounded form. The yellowish-white flowers give rise to bluish fruits resembling blueberries. The subspecies *edulis* has edible sweet berries, used extensively in the Soviet Union. Recent travelers there have reportedly tasted some delicious varieties!

***Myrica gale* Sweet gale**

This native plant is a small deciduous shrub, with spreading form and glossy foliage. It is seen infrequently in cultivation at present. Sweet gale has yellow flowers, little cone-like fruits, and a pleasing foliage fragrance -- this plant is the same genus as the bayberry. In England, branches are used to flavor a home brew known as "gale-beer." It is found in wet, acid sites, and is shade tolerant.

***Pinus cembra* var. *siberica* Swiss stone pine**

This pine is densely pyramidal when young, becoming open and flat topped when mature. It is slow growing, likes well drained loamy soil, which is lightly acid, and full sun. It is good as an accent or specimen plant because of its picturesque qualities, and can also be massed. *P. flexilis*, limber pine, is similar to the swiss stone pine, but a little less symmetrical. However, it is more susceptible to winter injury.

***Pinus contorta* var. *latifolia* Lodgepole pine**

The lodgepole pine has a long, clear cylindrical trunk, with a narrow open crown. It grows in a variety of soils, and will tolerate dry or exposed sites. The seed source determines hardiness with this and many other trees, especially pines. Only trees from high latitude seed sources, such as the Yukon Territory, are hardy here.

***Pinus mugo* Mugo pine**

***P. mugo mughus* Dwarf mugo pine**

The mugo pine is a broad spreading pine, bushy to rounded, usually low growing. It can be variable in height and spread -- the dwarf mugo tends to be lower and more compact. This pine is slow growing. It likes deep moist loam in sun or partial shade (this is one of the few pines that can tolerate shade). The more compact selections can be used as specimen plants, as a shrub border or in group plantings. These can be pruned annually to thicken the plant and keep it dwarf. Some plants seem more susceptible to winter injury. Again, a northern seed source is important.

***Pinus sylvestris* Scotch pine**

This pine is grown on tree farms for Christmas trees. Young trees are pyramidal in shape with short spreading branches. It becomes more picturesque with age, with a wide, spreading flat or rounded top. Growth is moderate when the tree is young, slowing with age. The scotch pine grows on a variety of sites as long as long as the soil is well drained. It likes full sun and acid soils. The bark is an attractive orangish-brown color, peeling in papery flakes. The tree can be used as a specimen plant or massed. A northern seed source is essential.

***Prunus maackii* Amur chokecherry**

This is a smaller tree than the Mayday tree (European bird cherry) so common here. It has white flowers in 2-3" racemes with

small black fruits. It needs well drained soil in sun or part shade. Its outstanding feature is the ornamental bark, which provides winter interest. This chokecherry has nice fall color and is suitable as a specimen plant or small shade tree.

***Prunus triloba* Russian almond**

This shrub has a rounded spreading form. Spectacular masses of double pink flowers appear in the spring, sometimes before the leaves. The rest of the year it is basically neutral in design qualities. It grows in sun or partial shade and requires a favorable location. Seed source may be important for winter hardiness.

***Pyrus ussuriensis* Ussurian pear**

This is the hardiest of all pears. It is a small rounded tree with handsome dark green leaves in summer. The Ussurian pear has thorns, white flowers, and seldom fruits in the Fairbanks area. It is used as a rootstock for grafting hardy pears. It has striking fall color.

***Sorbaria sorbifolia* False spiraea**

This is an erect, rather coarse multi-stemmed shrub with foliage similar to the European mountain ash. It spreads rapidly by suckers. This shrub prefers a moist well-drained soil in full sun or light shade. It is best to prune before new growth occurs as flowers are produced on the new wood. It is an excellent plant for a shrub border, hedge, massing or grouping. Be sure to

give it lots of room. We are testing a new selection at the Botanical Garden which has much larger flower heads and appears to be just as hardy.

***Sorbus scopulina* Greene's mountain ash**

***S. aucuparia* European mountain ash**

Greene's mountain ash is erect and oval in youth, gracefully open-headed at maturity. Young trees at the Botanical Garden winter-killed to the ground and grew back with multiple stems. They have been winter hardy ever since. The white flowers are described as malodorous. It is outstanding for the orange-red fruits which attract robins, thrushes, and various flycatchers. It is good for massing and needs a well-drained location. It has attractive fall color. The European mountain ash is similar.

***Ulmus pumila* Siberian elm**

Some landscape books have a very critical opinion of this small tree, considering it worthless. I think it has a certain charm, with a bright yellow fall color and nice winter interest provided by its highly textured bark.

