

# Stems for Winter Interest

Though the browns and grays of winter plants are not as eye-catching as summer blooms, many native plants still provide a great deal of visual interest and important wildlife habitat when garden cleanup can be left until spring. Here are a few examples you might find on the native plant trail:



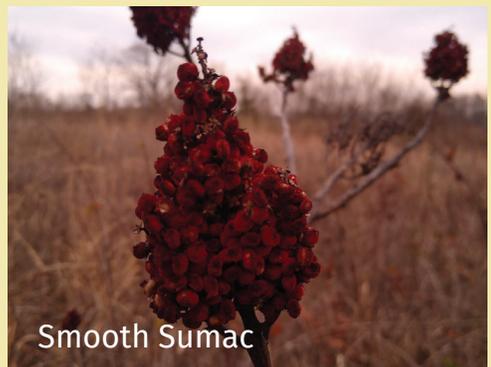
Bee Balm

**Bee Balm** (*Monarda spp.*) - The spent flowers of this easy-to-grow wildflower will remain on upright stems all winter. Overwintering birds such as cardinals and sparrows regularly visit these stems to forage for the remaining seeds nestled deep in the dead flowerheads. Other similar plant species, like our native mountain-mints (*Pycnanthemum spp.*) and coneflowers (*Echinacea spp.*) also provide overwinter food sources.



Switchgrass

**Switchgrass** (*Panicum virgatum*) - The tall, clumping stems of switchgrass provide excellent cover and nesting spaces for pheasants, quail, rabbits, and other overwintering animals. The stems hold up well all winter long, even through snows. This also makes them useful as screens along property lines in lieu of more traditional options like evergreen shrubs or trees. Other tall warm season grasses like Big Bluestem (*Andropogon gerardii*) and Indian Grass (*Sorghastrum nutans*) can also provide winter interest.



Smooth Sumac

**Sumac** (*Rhus spp.*) - After sumac leaves turn their fiery red and fall away in the autumn, this shrub retains its red berries. Clustered at the end of each stem, the berries are a favorite food source for overwintering birds, and will regularly attract goldfinches and chickadees throughout the season. The berries are edible for humans as well, and though each one has a large seed and very little flesh, they have a tart flavor and can be used to make an excellent lemonade substitute.



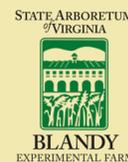
## YOUR SUPPORT MATTERS

The Native Plant Trail is supported by the Foundation of the State Arboretum. Become a member of FOSA and help preserve Virginia's Native Plants. Other benefits include discounts at other gardens across the country. Visit our website [blandy.virginia.edu](http://blandy.virginia.edu) and click on the "Support" tab for more information.

## CONTACT US

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# A Guide to the Native Plant Trail

The State Arboretum of Virginia  
at the University of Virginia's  
Blandy Experimental Farm

# Exploring the *Nancy Larrick Crosby* Native Plant Trail



The Native Plant Trail is a celebration of Virginia's native plants. Follow the trail through three unique habitats - a woodland, meadow, and a wetland. Each habitat features plants that showcase the beauty and diversity of our state's flora.

The gardens and landscapes in this area are intentionally naturalistic and 'wild' feeling. While this area is managed and new native plants are added periodically, we also try to leave space for natural processes to function. Important habitat features like dead stems, fallen leaves and decomposing logs are left year-round to support wildlife. This guide provides information about many native plants along the trail.

## Winter's austere beauty



As temperatures fall and the days shorten, most of Virginia's native plants go dormant for the autumn and winter months. Deciduous trees shed their leaves, and many perennials retreat underground.

Despite the promise of frost and snow there are still signs of life everywhere. Some hardy plants have evolved the ability to tough out winter's frigid weather while others leave behind conspicuous stems, seeds, and berries.



Cattail stems in winter

The logos by each plant entry indicate where they can be found on the trail:

Woodland Wetland Meadow

**American Sycamore** (*Platanus occidentalis*) - The brown outer bark of this tree flakes off as it ages, revealing the bright white inner bark beneath.

**Possumhaw** (*Ilex decidua*) - This holly shrub drops its leaves in midwinter, but will hang onto its bright red berries until they are eaten by birds, raccoons, or opossums.

**Witch Hazel** (*Hamamelis virginiana*) - This shrub begins flowering in late October and can bloom through December. The yellow flowers are typically pollinated by small bees, moths, and flies.

**Golden Ragwort** (*Packera aurea*) - Though it flowers in spring, this woodland herb retains its round basal leaves all year. This makes it an excellent evergreen groundcover for shady spaces.

**Eastern Redcedar** (*Juniperus virginiana*) - Despite its name, this plant is actually a juniper, not a cedar. It produces fragrant, blue juniper berries that are edible in small amounts.

**Adam's Needle** (*Yucca filamentosa*) - This evergreen plant has only one pollinator - the yucca moth. Female moths intentionally pollinate the plant and then lay eggs in the flower, where the larvae eventually eat some of the developing seeds.

**Honey Locust** (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) - This tree has clusters of very long, sharp thorns. The thorns are overkill to protect the tree from modern browsers such as deer, so it is thought they evolved as defense against now-extinct megafauna like mastodons.

**Persimmon** (*Diospyros virginiana*) - Native persimmon trees produce an edible fruit that doesn't begin to ripen until after first frost. Sometimes fruits can be found as late as January.

**Cattail** (*Typha angustifolia*) - Most parts of the cattail plant are edible, and were often eaten by many native American nations. The dried leaves from the plant were also a common building material and woven into baskets and mats.

**Bald Cypress** (*Taxodium distichum*) - A deciduous conifer, this tree's needles turn copper colored and drop in autumn. It also produces 'knees', aboveground roots that help it obtain air in flooded soils.

## What's in a sign?

Use the signs along the trail to locate plants, and refer to this guide for more information about many of them.

Common name and scientific name

**Heart-Leaf Skullcap**  
*Scutellaria ovata*

This annual wildflower grows in moist to dry forests, especially over limestone.



Description of plant form, habitat and growing conditions.

Map of wild distribution in Virginia. Counties with dots indicate where this plant has been recorded growing in the wild.

## Cold Winds Blow

While freezing is a real threat to many herbaceous plants, one of the main reasons plants go dormant is actually to conserve water.

Think about what winter weather does to your skin - since cool air holds less moisture, winter winds can dry out your skin, leading to chapped lips and other discomforts.

The same is true for plants - leaves are very porous and cold weather can quickly suck all the moisture out unless they're specifically adapted to handle it.

This is why most evergreen native plants have waxy leaves. Just like a layer of chapstick can protect your lips, waxy coatings protect plant leaves by creating a barrier against the cold air.

