

# **Common Shrubs of Central Maine Shorelines**



**Sue Gawler**  
and  
**Jack Bouchard**



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## **Sue Gawler**

1955-2015

Sue enlisted the help of her son Jack to create the first version of this brief guide dedicated to the lakeside vegetation and habitat of her beloved family camp in Belgrade Lakes; a home close to home since she was five years old. In my decades working on Maine lakes, I rarely encountered someone to whom a lakeside camp meant so much.

One of the leading botanists in Maine for years and a nationally known researcher in plant conservation, Sue recognized that we often overlook the shoreline shrubs, seemingly lowly but vital for habitat and water quality. She also appreciated the beauty of humble native vegetation and the endless spectacle of the true value of our native shores and the inhabitants there. She passed on this love, this sense of place, to her children and to so many whose lives she touched. I hope you find this guide valuable and that you will see our shoreline shrubs as the essence of the wild variety of Maine lakes.

Roy Bouchard  
Spring 2021

## INTRODUCTION

What makes a place a home? Far more than simple ownership, it's the sense of intimate connection to the land around you and to the abundance of life forms with which you share the land. A blend of scientific knowledge, ethical concern, and even spiritual connection, you can find expressions of this sensibility everywhere, from the local country store to the pages of Thoreau and Rachel Carson. It's what distinguishes living from thriving, the real from the ephemeral.

It's all too easy to lapse into seeing one's surroundings as a "green wall"; that is, to see plant life as inanimate objects that have no meaningful role to play in one's life. In truth, we are surrounded by and depend upon these very much alive, vibrant, dynamic ecosystems, of which plants are the backbone. If you look closely, you'll see subtle differences in what lives where. Shade; wind exposure; soil textures and moisture; and competitors for root space (to name just a few) all contribute to this.

Shrubs and other plants provide a wealth of pleasures and benefits. What is more satisfying than sitting quietly and watching a chipmunk scurry about under a shrub's protective branches, or seeing a bird picking ripe blueberries off a bush (if we haven't gotten them ourselves first)? The shrubs in this short guide are all native, and they both stabilize the shoreline and look natural. Why bring in alien shrubs when these do the work?

At homes and summer camps everywhere, people are learning to live with this in mind and to preserve the natural beauty of the area, and in this spirit we'd like to offer you this short guide to the shrubs you'll often find in Central Maine, and especially along shoreline areas.

Sue Gawler and Jack Bouchard  
Spring 2015



## DRIER AREAS

### Lowbush Blueberry

*Vaccinium angustifolium*

Growing less than a foot high, this is great for groundcover and is very common in a variety of habitats. It sports cream-colored, bell-shaped flowers in early June, and berries in July and August. Birds and small mammals love the berries as much as we do. This is the one in *Blueberries for Sal* (one of the family's favorite books, it appeals to the sense of a Maine summer for the child in all of us).



Photo Credit: Flickr/Jason S.



## DRIER AREAS

### Huckleberry

*Gaylussacia baccata*

Sue's all-around favorite shrub for drier shorelines. Grows only 2-3' tall, so it doesn't impede the view. Edible and pretty, abundant it inhabits many shoreline areas. You can tell it apart from its cousins, the blueberries, by the shiny golden resin-dots on the undersides of the leaves (though you may need a magnifying glass).



Photo Credit: Jeffrey Pippen

## DRIER AREAS

### **Shadbush or Juneberry**

*Amelanchier arborea* or *A. canadensis*

A beautiful shrub found sporadically along Maine shorelines. Leaves are oval, usually 2-3" long, soft, green, and slightly toothed along the edges. White flowers appear in May and tasty fruits in June, though the birds usually get them first.





## DRIER AREAS

### **Common Juniper** *Juniperus communis*

The only evergreen shrub on this list, it displays small, sharp-pointed, blue-green needles. It usually grows less than 2' high and prefers dry areas and plentiful sunlight, though you will find it in partial shade too. Common in formerly grazed areas, which many shorelines were after settlement. Fun fact: juniper berries give gin its flavor.



## DRIER AREAS

### **Maple-Leaf Viburnum**

*Viburnum acerifolium*

Another nice shrub that only gets about 2' tall. Easily recognized, it's one of only two plants on this list with opposite leaves, that is, the leaves occur opposite each other on the stem (the other one is buttonbush; see below). Other shrubs have alternate leaves, where the leaves occur singly on the stem. Flat-topped clusters of small white flowers develop in midsummer, though it rarely flowers if there's too much shade. It tends to grow on the driest sites.



Photo Credit: Gary Flewless



## DRIER AREAS

### **Black Chokeberry** *Aronia melanocarpa*

A low shrub that grows here and there, never in profusion. The name refers to the unpleasant taste of the berries, but they are not poisonous. Pretty, white, five-petaled flowers appear in June. Usually 1-2' tall, they can be up to 4'; you can tell it from blueberries and huckleberries (which are superficially similar, but not closely related) because it has a line of tiny dark hairs running up the center of the top of the leaf.





## DRIER AREAS

### **Witch-hazel**

*Hamamelis virginiana*

A tall shrub found in woodland understories throughout the northeast. It is easily recognized by its leaves which are asymmetrical at the base; and by the irregular, rounded teeth along the leaf sides. Witch-hazel is unique among the northeastern flora in its late flowering: the pale yellow flowers with four strap-shaped petals do not appear until late October, lasting well into November. It grows here and there along shorelines, and is common in forest interiors.





## WETTER SITES, POORLY DRAINED SOILS

### **Alder**

*Alnus incana* ssp. *rugosa*

A large, vigorous shrub with coarsely toothed leaves. It grows anywhere it's wet. While it can be pruned to a desirable height if it's more than 3' tall, the shoreland zoning ordinance requires that plants under 3' be left alone. One of the reasons alder is so successful in wet areas, which tend to be very low in nitrogen, is its ability to use, or "fix", atmospheric nitrogen, which most plants can't.



## WETTER SITES

### **Highbush Blueberry**

*Vaccinium corymbosum*

Grows mostly where it's wet, but can grow where it's drier: very adaptable in terms of soil moisture. Like its congener, the lowbush blueberry, it has creamy, bell-shaped flowers. Blooms in early June, and the berries are ripe in July and August. Perfect for pancakes!



## WETTER SITES

### **Sweetgale** *Myrica gale*

A tidy shrub, usually 2-3' tall, with small bluish-green leaves. Usually grows where its roots can be in water. Closely related to bayberry, its leaves and small, spiky fruiting clusters give off a pleasant spicy aroma when crushed.





## WETTER SITES

### **Buttonbush**

#### *Cephalanthus occidentalis*

A tall shrub whose long, oval leaves are borne opposite each other, or commonly in threes. In midsummer, it sports attractive spherical clusters of small white flowers, which develop into the fruiting clusters that give the shrub its name. Like alder, it can be pruned to a more manageable height.





## WETTER SITES

### **Maleberry** *Lyonia ligustrina*

A member of the large heath family (Ericaceae), like blueberries and huckleberries, but without the tasty berries. Its dry, hard fruits are more like mountain laurel, also a member of the heath family. It has clusters of white, bell-shaped flowers in midsummer. Its leaves are oval, about 3" long, glossy and dark green. Not often found in large numbers.



## WETTER SITES

### Winterberry Holly

*Ilex verticillata*

This common shrub of wetland borders is best known for its bright red berries that are striking in early winter (until the birds clean them out). In summer, it is a rather nondescript, medium-sized shrub. Like all hollies, it is dioecious, meaning that the male and female flowers are on separate plants. Usually, both sexes occur in a given area.

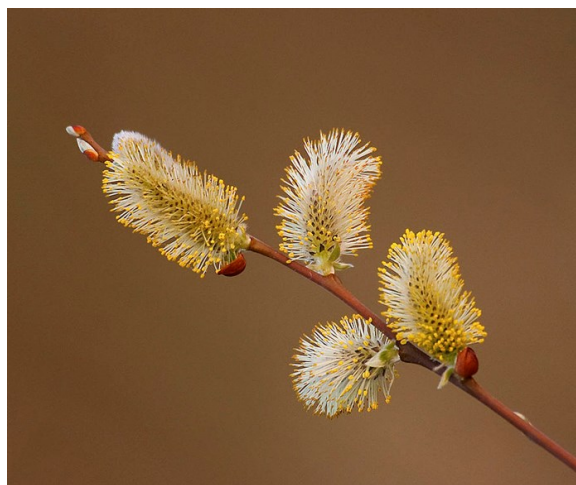


## WETTER SITES

### **Pussy Willow**

#### *Salix discolor and other shrub willow species*

Pussy Willow is the most common of several shrub willows found along Maine shorelines. Pussy Willow has leaves that are about 1" wide and 3" - 4" long, dull green on top, and with irregular teeth along the sides. The "pussies" are welcomed each year as a sign of spring, and are the male catkins that will eventually produce pollen if left on the plant. Willows can be vigorous growers but, like alder and but-tombush, can be pruned to a manageable size.





## Things To Keep In Mind

These are just the more common shrubs at camp (the tip of the iceberg, so to speak). There are all sorts of trees, grasses, sedges and non-woody plants growing everywhere, just waiting for you to discover them! Except for a few very shaded areas under dense pine trees, and in the places on which we walk and drive, plants cover the ground in several layers, all making use of whatever resource is available: sun, soil, nutrients and spaces vacated by earlier residents. They build soil and provide a rich environment for animals of all sorts. The varied experiences they provide are an important reason not to replace native vegetation with lawn, as lawns are essentially biological deserts that seriously harm the lakes and streams they border (via runoff, erosion and all sorts of other nasty stuff). All of these residents of our shorelines combine to shape their environment and our experience of what it means to be near the water. We hope you enjoy and cherish them as much as we have!

## More Resources for You

The Native Plant Trust: [nativeplanttrust.org](http://nativeplanttrust.org)

The Wild Seed Project: [wildseedproject.net](http://wildseedproject.net)

Maine Audubon's Native Plant Finder: [mainenativeplants.org](http://mainenativeplants.org)

Maine Yardscaping Program: [yardscaping.org](http://yardscaping.org)

Protect Your Pond with Native Buffer Plants: [lakes.me/protect](http://lakes.me/protect)

Please visit the Maine Lakes Library at [www.lakes.me/library](http://www.lakes.me/library) for more resources to help you build better buffers on your lakefront property.



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