

Food for the Birds, Feast for the Eyes

Ornamental Shrubs That Produce Fruit for Northern Birds

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Birds demand so little, and provide so much enjoyment. They should be encouraged in every landscape. Golf courses can play a major role in providing the food, shelter and water required for bird populations to thrive. In urban areas where individual homeowners control relatively small plots of land, golf courses are among the larger tracts administered by single managers. If those managers provide a diverse habitat that attracts birds, the entire community benefits. And in rural settings, golf courses, by nature of their design, offer maximum woodland edge where plant diversity, light, food and cover provide everything a bird could want.

Shrubs are a wonderful addition to the golf landscape for many reasons. At the edge of wooded areas between fairways, they offer golfers color, texture and fragrance. At the same time, they provide a significant source of food for birds, primarily in the form of their fruits.

Let's focus on woody landscape plants that double as sources of fruits for birds. Here are ten small trees and shrubs for Minnesota that have excellent landscape qualities. They also provide fruit from summer to winter. Even though some of these plants provide bird food during a time of the year when golfers are not present, they are still important. After all, birds need to eat year-round.

Ten Small Trees and Shrubs That Feed Birds On the Golf Course

Aronia melanocarpa, the "Black Chokeberry," is a member of the Rose Family. It reaches a height of 5' and suckers to form rather large colonies. A highly adaptable shrub, it performs equally well in low, wet spots and dry sandy hillsides. This plant belongs at the edge of wooded areas, massed in shrub borders, or as a background shrub in perennial gardens. The white flowers are attractive in spring. A related species, *Aronia arbutifolia*, is the "Red Chokeberry." It reaches 8-10' in height and suckers into a colony perhaps 5' across. Red Chokeberry is less hardy than Black chokeberry, and it becomes rather open and leggy with age. Both species have quite shiny leaves that turn reddish-purple in fall, as the fruits mature. The fruits of both species are attractive, but the Red Chokeberry fruits are more showy in the landscape than the black ones. On both species, the 1/4" fruits are reminiscent of small apples. They are called "chokeberries" because they are very tart; often even the birds don't eat them until midwinter.

Crataegus phaenopyrum, the "Washington Hawthorn," is a small tree that reaches a height of 25' with a slightly narrower spread. At maturity, it is a rounded thorny tree that is useful as either a single specimen plant, or in a hedge. The 1-3" thorns make this plant an effective barrier at the edge of a landscaped area, and also a protective nesting site for birds. White flowers in June are effective, the foliage is rather shiny and dark green all summer, and the orange/purple fall color is attractive. The fruits are bright red, 1/4" in diameter, and similar to small crabapples. They are mealy in texture, and birds do not favor them. Hence, the fruit provides excellent fall and winter color in the landscape and later serves as bird food for early spring migrators. *Crataegus viridis*, the "Green Hawthorn," is very similar and equally desirable in the landscape, but is less hardy.

Ilex verticillata, "Common Winterberry" or "Black Alder," is the most northerly of the hollies. Hardy through much of Minnesota, it provides excellent early winter fruits. All hollies are dioecious, producing male flowers on some plants and female flowers on others. That means you must purchase at least one male plant per planting, to ensure fruits on the females. Common Winterberry reaches a height and spread of 8' with twiggy branches and a suckering but not invasive habit. Plants perform best in wet conditions and acid soils, and adapt to full sun or light shade. The leaves are simple and dark green, and do not develop significant fall color. But what the plant lacks in fall color, it more than makes up for with its fruits. The bright red, 1/4" fruits ripen in September and remain on the plants into winter, depending on when the birds discover them. Northern cardinals and those brown thrashers that remain in the area over winter are often seen on various species of hollies, including this one. This plant is superb as a mass planting near a body of water. Several improved cultivars have been introduced, including 'Sparkleberry' and 'Winter Red.'

The "Crabapples," members of the genus *Malus*, are without equal in the landscape for their four-season value. They produce white, pink or reddish flowers in spring, excellent foliage all summer, and fruits in fall that persist in many cases until the flowers begin to open the following spring. Most reach a height between 15' and 25', although a few reach only 5-8' in height, and some wild types reach as much as 35-40'. Habits vary, and one crab-

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apple or another fits nearly any physical spot in the landscape. Besides requiring full sun and good drainage, crabapples are quite adaptable. They are susceptible to a number of fairly serious diseases, but many resistant types are available. About 700 cultivars have been introduced, and nearly 200 of them are offered by various nurseries. Some excellent ones, including 'Sparkler,' have been introduced by the University of Minnesota. Each crabapple has a personality of its own. 'Bob White' has persistent yellow fruits, 'Adams' has pink flowers and persistent red fruits, 'Red Jade' has a graceful weeping habit, *Malus sargentii* is widespread, and 'Tina' matures at 5' in height. Sweet-flavored, juicy crabapples provide excellent forage for birds in fall and early winter. More mealy-textured, tart fruits that persist on branches serve as much-needed food for early-spring robins returning from the south.

Myrica pensylvanica is the "Northern Bayberry." In the landscape, it is useful for massing in the border, and its texture combines well with broadleaf evergreens. Since it is a seashore native, it is useful in areas where salt is a problem, and also where poor soils prevail. It seems to perform equally well in sunny or shady sites, heavy or light soils. Northern Bayberry reaches 6-8' in height, and produces rather insignificant flowers in early spring. The leaves are wavy-edged, dark green and leathery, and yield a distinct fragrance when crushed (the fruits' wax is used to scent bayberry candles). The special ornamental value of this plant is the fruit. Produced heavily on female plants, the waxy grayish fruits are subtly attractive from fall until spring.

"Staghorn Sumac," *Rhus typhina*, is either loved or hated by landscape managers. This plant is native to most of eastern U.S. and Canada, where it is generally found on dry, well-drained, poor soil. It suckers and forms large colonies, often admired along highways and in abandoned areas of cities. In the landscape, it rarely exceeds 20' in height, but can exceed 20' in width. The texture is quite fine in summer, but much more coarse in winter, when the craggy stems are quite picturesque. The greenish flowers of mid-summer develop into reddish fruit clusters that attract robins, red-eyed vireos and northern cardinals. Although this plant should be avoided in refined landscape situations, it is very useful in naturalized sites, along streambanks or in dry barren sites. A related native species, *Rhus aromatica*, is called "Fragrant Sumac." This plant's 2-3' height and spread of up to 10' makes it an excellent tall groundcover on banks and also in raised beds in parking lots.

Many roses are too prone to problems to be considered for the golf course landscape, but *Rosa rugosa*, the "Rugose Rose," is an excellent shrub. Plants reach 5' in height and spread, and form sturdy shrubs. The red, pink or white flowers of early summer are highly fragrant and popular, and the fruits, or "hips," are red or orange, persistent and highly ornamental into late winter. Rugose Roses are useful along

banks and in shrub borders. They tolerate severe pruning, form excellent hedges and their spines make them good candidates for traffic control. The plants tolerate salt well, and are sometimes called "saltspray roses" because they have naturalized along the east coast.

"European Mountainash," *Sorbus aucuparia*, is truly a plant for northern landscapes. It is prone to many devastating problems including fireblight, crown gall, canker, roundheaded borer and mountainash sawfly, but these problems are more serious in warmer climates, and well-grown specimens in cool sites can thrive for many years. The whitish flower clusters in early summer are attractive, and the dissect leaves lend a graceful texture in summer. But the real beauty of this 25' tree becomes evident in the fall as the orange fruits ripen and bend the branches slightly, at which time flocks of birds arrive to feed. It is one of the delights of fall to watch flocks of cedar waxwings descend to feed on mountainash fruits. They arrive in late fall, after the fruits have begun to ferment. The birds often have trouble orienting themselves to fly after eating several fruits. Full sun, slightly acid soils and cool summers are essential for good performance.

Symphoricarpos albus is the native "Common Snowberry." This is not one of the most exciting landscape plants available, but it is useful on shady banks where it holds the soil against erosion. It succeeds in most soils, and in full sun or medium shade. It suckers into a 3' wide shrub. The early summer pink flowers are not showy and the leaves are not exciting, but the white fruits, about 5/8" across, are effective all fall and into early winter.

Many viburnums are popular landscape specimens, but one native type in particular is excellent where birds are valued. *Viburnum trilobum* is commonly known as the "American Cranberrybush Viburnum." It reaches 8-10' in height and spread, and forms an attractive rounded shrub. The leaves, similar in appearance to those of maples, turn reddish purple in the fall. The shiny red clustered fruits attract birds in fall and winter, and most are not eaten until January or February because of their tartness. This shrub is too large for many home landscapes, but on the golf course it makes a handsome addition to shrub borders. Its flowers, summer foliage and fall and winter fruits provide interest during most of the year. It does best in full sun and well-drained soils, but tolerates light shade well.

In addition to these woody plants with great landscape value, many other shrubs can be added to less developed sites within the golf course, to provide more fruits for birds. Blackberries provide food for many birds including gray catbirds, brown thrashers and northern cardinals. Elderberries are eaten by gray catbirds, brown thrashers, cedar waxwings and rose-breasted grosbeaks. Plant some of the less invasive honeysuckles to attract birds such as robins and gray catbirds. Virginia creeper, or woodbine, harbors hundreds of birds while it is fruiting. Pin cherries and chokecherries in more wild areas offer fruits in early and midsummer, feeding robins, gray catbirds, cedar waxwings and rose-breasted grosbeaks.