The Alternatives

**Alnus rugosa** a.k.a. *Alnus incana ssp. rugosa* (speckled alder) *Alnus serrulata* (hazel alder)

Ohio is home to two native Alder species, *Alnus rugosa* a.k.a. *Alnus incana* ssp. *rugosa* (speckled alder) and *Alnus serrulata* (hazel alder). Both of these alternatives are deciduous shrubs or small trees growing to an average height of 7-15 feet. If pruned to two to three stems both species can be trained to tree form. Their fast growing trunks are an excellent choice to fill in a riparian planting or provide cover for wildlife, such as songbirds, waterfowl and small mammals. These soggily soil loving species reduce soil erosion and fix nitrogen, thus improving the soil. While both native alder species are similar in the previously mentioned qualities, they also have some marked differences.

With its range extending from northeast Ohio to New England and throughout much of Canada, *Alnus rugosa* is a hardy plant. It thrives in areas with cold blustery winters and provides beautiful interest with its reddish-brown bark, which is speckled with white lenticels, blister-like pores that allow for gas exchange. Its summer leaves are a dull green on top and whitish on the bottom with doubly serrate edges. *A. rugosa* walks the line between tree and shrub. If given the opportunity it will form dense thickets, but if pruned it can be trained to a tree, reaching up to 30 feet.

In contrast to *Alnus rugosa*, *Alnus serrulata* tends toward a smaller stature, usually forming shrubby thickets. Its range stretches throughout the southeastern United States, so it is tolerant of hot, humid weather. While its bark is less showy than *A. rugosa* it still provides winter interest in the form of unique twisted trunks. Additionally, the female flowers provide a rich reddish-brown early spring color.

**Betula nigra** (river birch)

Betula nigra (river birch) is when your home landscape is missing. Betula nigra (river birch) more than satisfies the need. While many think of the stark white beauty of *Betula papyrifera* (paper birch) when they think of birches, *B. nigra* is a better choice for our hot, humid summers. *B. nigra* has cream, brown and peach colored exfoliating bark and delicate branches with triangle-shaped leaves.

While the species *B. nigra* itself is an excellent landscape choice, the cultivar "Heritage" improves on these positive qualities. The bark of 'Heritage' has a salmon–cream to brownish bark which exfoliates to reveal a white inner bark. The leaves are also larger and glossier than the species and turn a golden yellow in fall.

**Salix nigra** (black willow)

If you want to plant a tree in a frequently wet spot on your property, *Salix nigra* (black willow) may fit the bill. *S. nigra* is one of about 90 native willow species in North America. While many willows are shrubs, *S. nigra* is a tree that on average grows to a height of 30–60 feet within the northern portion of its range. Its irregular shape, with branches that droop ever so slightly at the tip and forwared bark, make it a superb focal point of a landscape.