The Native Alternatives

**Ilex verticillata** (winterberry)

A deciduous holly native to eastern North America, *Ilex verticillata* (winterberry) is best known for its attractive berries, which persist through the winter. Hardy to Zone 3, winterberry has an upright, rounded form and prefers full sun or partial shade and moist, fertile, acidic soil. It does poorly in alkaline soil. In the spring, small greenish-white flowers appear and, if effectively pollinated, will give way to bright red berries in the fall, which are enjoyed by birds. Winterberry is dioecious, meaning male and female flowers are on separate plants, so female winterberries require a male pollinator to produce the colorful berries. For successful berry set, plant one male for up to 10 females.

Holden’s horticulture staff recommends the cultivar ‘Red Sprite,’ a female winterberry with a compact form that grows four feet tall and produces larger berries. Use ‘Jim Dandy’ as the male pollinator. ‘Red Sprite’ can be used for mass plantings or as an accent plant along ponds and bogs. Look for ‘Red Sprite’ near the first parking lot across from the sidewalk that leads to the Corning Visitor Center.

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**Fothergilla gardenii** (Witch alder)

Witch alder is a small, slow-growing shrub native to the southeastern United States. Hardy to Zone 5, it has an upright, rounded form and can reach 3-5 feet tall and wide. Fragrant white bottlebrush flowers appear in the spring, followed by dark green leaves that turn brilliant orange to burgundy in the fall. Zigzag stems provide winter interest. The best fall color occurs under full sun, but it can tolerate partial shade. Because witch alder prefers acidic soil, plant it with rhododendrons, azaleas and mountain laurels. A member of the witch hazel family, witch alder has no serious disease and insect problems and pruning is not required, as it maintains its own natural shape. Use as a hedge, in mass plantings or underneath shade trees. Witch alder can be found on Blueberry Pond, across the path from the Prairie Garden and in the Arthur S. Holden Sr. Hedge Collection.

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The Invasive

**Berberis thunbergii** (Japanese barberry)

In 1875, *Berberis thunbergii* (Japanese barberry) was introduced to North America as an ornamental when seeds from Russia were sent to the Arnold Arboretum in Boston. It was also used as an alternative to *Berberis vulgaris* (common barberry), a relative imported by early European settlers for dyes and jams, which was found to be a host for wheat rust. Because of its attractive fall foliage and berries, many Japanese barberry cultivars are available. However, it has become invasive in many areas, spreading from creeping roots or from branches that root when they touch the ground. Birds also spread the seeds. A single plant can grow quite large in a variety of habitats, including shaded woodlands, open fields and forest edges, where it out competes native plants.

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By Annie Raup, education intern

Hundreds of plants have been introduced to the United States from other parts of the world. Some have come here accidentally in seed stock, while others were brought here intentionally for horticultural use. A small number of these introduced plants have gotten a little too comfortable in their new environment. Because they have no native predators and produce a lot of fruit and seed that are efficiently dispersed, they are invading natural areas. The aggressiveness of these invasive plants affects natural areas and wildlife by decreasing biodiversity, competing with native and rare plants and eliminating wildlife habitat and food sources.

*Plant This, Not That* features a list of native alternatives to a commonly used landscape plant that has become invasive. The alternatives were chosen because their characteristics—form, flowers, fruit or fall color—are similar to that of the invasive and fulfill the same landscaping need. On a broader scale, native plants help create a healthier ecosystem, attract a greater diversity of wildlife and may minimize the need for fertilizers and pesticides.

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**Japanese barberry infestation. Leslie J. Mehrhoff, University of Connecticut, Bugwood.org**

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**Japanese barberry fall foliage and berries. WildTiger, Wikimedia Commons**

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**Berenberg yellow foliage. Raul654, Wikimedia Commons**