

Establishing a Native Herbaceous Understory in Second-Growth Urban Woods

Many of our urban woodlands are choked with Amur honeysuckle, common buckthorn or other invasive shrubs. Removal and treatment of these invaders is only the first step in their restoration. While higher quality woods that have never been completely cutover may have sufficient remnant understory to recover without assistance, many second growth urban woodlots were completely cleared for agriculture or other development at one time, eliminating the understory diversity. Typically when the invasive shrub layer is removed from these woods, the entire understory becomes a sea of invasive garlic mustard. In this situation it is vital to install a native seed mix to jump start the recovery.

Sites with prolific seed banks of garlic mustard and honeysuckle resprouts should be planted with only native woodland grasses to allow for continued selective herbicide treatment. For floodplains and wetter woods, Virginia Wild Rye (*Elymus virginicus*), Riverbank Wild Rye (*Elymus riparius*) and Northern Sea Oats (*Chasmanthium latifolium*) should be sown. Upland sites may utilize additional species including Silky Wild Rye (*Elymus villosus*), Bottlebrush Grass (*Hystrix patula*) and Beak Grass (*Diarrhena americana*).

Once the seed bank of invasive broadleaf species has been depleted, which may take 5 years or more, forbs and sedges such as those contained in our [Forested Wetland Mix](#) or our [Upland Woodland Mix](#) may be added to enhance diversity and provide nectar for pollinators. Spring ephemeral wildflowers are more challenging to establish. Many of their seeds are recalcitrant, which means they must stay consistently moist or they will lose viability. Since they cannot be stored dry, they are typically not commercially available. The best way to reestablish them is to collect the seed when it ripens in mid to late spring from private woodlands with permission and immediately broadcast the seeds in the restoration area. These recalcitrant species have a fleshy elaiosome, a lipid-rich appendage design to attract ants. The ants carry the seeds underground where they are protected from desiccation and typically germinate the next spring.

By following these steps, we can restore our urban woodlots to their potential diversity and ecological function.

PLANT FEATURE: NEW JERSEY TEA (*CEANOTHUS AMERICANUS*)

One of the few shrubs native to our prairies, New Jersey Tea is a plant with many desirable attributes for the landscape. One of our lowest stature shrubs, it typically reaches only about 18" in height. The two inch clusters of tiny white flowers that decorate the branches in early summer are intensely attractive to a wide variety of pollinators. The flowers appear on new wood, an adaptation to the high fire frequency in its prairie habitat. In fact, the seeds require a heat treatment to stimulate germination, another adaptation to fire. The dark green foliage is attractive throughout the season. New Jersey Tea is easy to grow in full sun to partial shade in well-drained soil. It is very drought tolerant once established.

In a garden setting, young plants should be protected from rabbits for the first two growing seasons. In a restoration, New Jersey Tea should be utilized in well-drained prairies with associates from our [Low Stature Prairie Mix](#).

