

Shrubs in a Prairie?

While most prairie plants are herbaceous, there are a few shrubs that have evolved to call the prairie home. Leadplant, New Jersey tea, and meadowsweet are common constituents of the eastern tallgrass prairie. Adaptations to a prairie environment include low stature, the ability to vigorously resprout following fire or browsing, and the ability to bloom on new wood.

New Jersey Tea (*Ceanothus americanus*) is well adapted to the prairies as well as fire-managed savannas. Its attractive dark green foliage can be brewed to make a flavorful tea substitute, resulting in its common name. New Jersey Tea is typically found in well-drained soils, often composed of sand and gravel outwash. It is typically shorter than most herbaceous prairie plants, maturing at 1 to 2 feet in height. The small white flowers bloom in early summer, attracting a myriad of pollinators. The seed capsules ripen in late summer, producing small, hard shiny seeds that require a heat treatment to germinate, an adaptation to a fire-maintained environment.

Leadplant (*Amorpha canescens*) is also a low growing shrub of well-drained soils. The grey-green compound foliage gives this legume a very distinctive look. Racemes of purple flower appear in mid-summer. Leadplant develops a loose open structure in contrast to the dense growth habit of New Jersey Tea. Leadplant does well in both sandy and loamy prairies.

Meadowsweet (*Spirea alba*) is typical of wet prairies and sedge meadows where it prefers soils with a high organic content. Pyramidal racemes of white flowers peak in mid-summer. Meadowsweet has a taller more upright form than New Jersey tea or leadplant, frequently reaching 3-4 feet in height. Its attractive flowers make Meadowsweet an excellent shrub for landscaping where it is easily grown in moist soil.

Plant Feature: Blue-stemmed Goldenrod (*Solidago caesia*)

Blue-stemmed Goldenrod is attractive low stature plant for well-drained shady situations. Native to mesic to dry shade, it is a common understory species of oak-hickory woodlands. Its arching stems typically grow 1 to 2 feet tall. The flowers bloom in September in clusters at each leaf axil along the stem, resulting in its other common name: wreath goldenrod. It does not spread by rhizomes, making it a well-behaved addition to the shade garden.

Bluestem goldenrod does well with Wild Geranium (*Geranium maculatum*), Wild Stonecrop (*Sedum ternatum*), Short's Aster (*Aster shortii*) and Bottlebrush Grass (*Hystrix patula*) in a shade garden. In a woodland restoration, it should be used with associates from our [Upland Woodland Mix](#).

