

Remember the Herbaceous Layer in Reforestation Projects

While ecologists are well aware that much of the plant diversity in woodlands occurs in the herbaceous understory, reforestation managers often ignore this fact when installing tree seedlings. Frequently, nothing at all is specified to be installed between the rows of trees. In other cases, nonnative clovers or other legumes may be included. As a result, after the typical annual weeds dissipate, perennial weeds such as Canada thistle come to dominate until the canopy closes. Following canopy closure, these sun loving weeds give way to shade tolerant invasive plants such as garlic mustard and Amur honeysuckle.

This predictable succession of noxious weeds can be preempted through the installation of a native understory mix. Native wild ryes should make up the backbone of these mixes. Virginia Wild Rye (*Elymus virginicus*) and Riverbank Wild Rye (*Elymus riparius*) are particularly effective since they grow well in sun or shade. A variety of other grasses may be utilized including Wood Reed (*Cinna arundinacea*), Beak Grass (*Diarrhena americana*) and Bottlebrush Grass (*Hystrix patula*). Several sedges are appropriate for floodplain reforestations including Burr Sedge (*Carex grayi*), Frank's Sedge (*Carex frankii*), and Meadow Sedge (*Carex granularis*).

Depending on the moisture levels there are a variety of hardy forbs that will tolerate the sunnier conditions until the canopy closes. In upland situations, try Sweet Joe-pye Weed (*Eupatorium purpureum*), White Snake-root (*Eupatorium rugosum*), False Sunflower (*Heliopsis helianthoides*) and Smooth Beardtongue (*Penstemon calyosus*). In floodplain areas, Panicked Aster (*Aster simplex*), Three-lobed Black-Eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia triloba*), Cupplant (*Silphium perfoliatum*), and Golden Alexanders (*Zizia aurea*) will make your installation more colorful, diverse and pollinator friendly.

Plant Feature -Autumn Sneezweed (*Helenium autumnale*)

Like goldenrods, this plant could use a P.R. agent. In spite of its showy flowers designed to attract insect pollinators, its common name leads people to believe it is a source of agony during hay fever season in late summer and early fall. Although it is not a source of wind-borne pollen, the name sneezweed is not a misnomer. When handled, the dried seed heads produce an irritating dust very effective at inducing sneezes. Based on personal experience, a good dose of this dust can result in up to 30 minutes of sneezing! Fortunately, when used in the landscape, there is never any reason to stick one's nose in the dried seed heads, so this odd characteristic should not be a deterrent to utilizing this showy native. It grows 3-4 feet tall in full sun to partial shade in moist to wet soil. The large showy clusters of flowers typically open in August and last well into September.



In the landscape, sneezweed is an excellent plant for raingardens, vegetated swales and other storm water practices. In a restoration, it should be used in wetland applications with associates from our [sedge meadow mix](#).