

*Central New York
Lawns, Landscapes & Gardens
Facts*

Central New York Lawns, Landscapes & Gardens Facts are a series of fact sheets that address a wide range of lawn, landscape, garden and houseplant concerns. The purpose of this series is to provide readers with timely, practical and unbiased information specific to Central New York conditions and is based on Ettinger's "Let's Get Growing" column that's appeared in the Eagle Group of community newspapers since 1993.

Individual copies of fact sheets in the series are free upon request. Quantity discounts for educational and commercial purposes are available upon request.

Opinions, questions, and concerns are always welcome. Please write to Terry Ettinger, 119 Concord Place, Syracuse, New York 13210-2649. You may also send your comments and questions via e-mail to: terry@tlehcs.com, or call 315-471-5854.

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Central New York Lawns, Landscapes & Gardens Facts

Recommended Plants for Wet Soils

Where I grew up in Illinois, the soils were very sandy and extremely well-drained. Even after days of heavy rain, it took only a couple of dry days for breezes to raise dust from the fields on my grandparent's farm.

This is hardly the case across much of Central New York. Here, soils often have a high content of clay and are very poorly drained. In these places, water often stands for days, or even weeks after a stretch of rainy weather. There are even neighborhoods where any hole that's dug quickly fills with water that's "perched" on top of poorly drained subsoil—even weeks after the last rainfall!

In places where soils remain wet for long periods of time, it can be impossible to grow many of the most popular landscape plants. Yews, rhododendrons and azaleas, roses, and even common lawn grasses such as Kentucky bluegrass, fine fescue, and perennial ryegrass do not grow well, or sometimes at all in wet soils. And, while it's possible to modify sites by installing raised beds and/or below-ground drainage in order to grow our favorite plants, it can be very expensive and is frequently only marginally effective.

A better alternative, I think, is to add plants that *thrive* in wet soils to those areas of

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Winterberry (lower left), hardy hibiscus (center) and Japanese Forest or Hakone grass (lower right) are but just a few examples of dozens of trees, shrubs and perennials suitable for Central New York landscapes that thrive in constantly damp to wet soils.



Inkberry, the three evergreen plants in the foreground in the picture above, are native to the northeast and thrive in wet soils. Meanwhile, yews—the four dead plants behind the inkberry and planted in many Central New York landscapes—do not survive in wet soils!



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your landscape and garden that are occasionally to persistently wet. Many of these plants offer multiple seasons of interest and some are actually native to Central New York! What follows is a listing of just a few of the most readily available trees, shrubs and perennials for wet soils.

TREES

Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*)

Depending upon variety can grow fifty to eighty feet tall and spread forty feet or more.

Often referred to as “swamp” maple, this tree is native to Central New York and very common in wet, swampy locations. Many cultivated varieties are available in the nursery trade and most are quite fast growing. Note that the summer foliage is green, not red, despite the tree’s common name. Fall foliage ranges from yellow to vivid red and orange.

‘Autumn Brilliance’ Serviceberry (*Amelanchier x. grandiflora* ‘Autumn Brilliance’)

Twenty feet tall with a similar spread.

Native to Central New York. Covered with tiny, white flowers in late April. Purple fruit are delicious—if you can get to them before the birds do in late June! Foliage turns brilliant orange to red in October.

‘Heritage’ River Birch (*Betula nigra* ‘Heritage’)

Fifty feet tall and spreading to forty feet.

Cinnamon to reddish brown peeling bark is attractive during the summer and stunning against winter snow. Dark green leaves turn a nice yellow in the fall. Very pest resistant and fast growing.

‘Cimmaron’ White Ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*)

Fifty feet tall and spreading to thirty to forty feet.

Native throughout eastern North America, this medium to large shade tree is native to bottomlands that frequently flood in early spring. However, once established it’s relatively fast-growing and adaptable to range of soil and exposure conditions. Common cultivated varieties include ‘Cimmaron’ (reddish fall foliage) and ‘Marshall’s Seedless,’ ‘Patmore,’ and ‘Summit,’ all of which have yellow fall foliage.

Sweet Bay Magnolia (*Magnolia virginiana*)

Ten to fifteen feet tall with a similar spread.

Though native along the Atlantic seaboard from Massachusetts to northern Florida, this magnolia has been grown by Chicago-area nurseries for many years. Thrives in moist to constantly wet locations in full sun to light shade. Light green leaves are silvery beneath and provide backdrop for creamy white, lemon-scented June/July flowers. In some years will flower sporadically into August!

Black Gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*)

Fifty feet tall with a spread of thirty to forty feet at maturity.

Native to isolated, wet streamsides and swamps in Central New York, this medium-sized tree should be much more widely utilized in landscape settings. Glossy green leaves are unaffected by pests during the summer months, then turn brilliant scarlet in October.

Thrives where soils are slightly acidic and moist to wet during parts of the year. Can tolerate drought once established.

SHRUBS AND GROUNDCOVERS

‘Brilliantissima’ Red Chokeberry (*Aronia arbutifolia* ‘Brilliantissima’)

Six to eight feet tall with a mature spread of five feet.

Native to the northern United States, this medium-sized shrub thrives under a wide range of conditions from wet to dry and full sun to mostly shaded areas. Large numbers of pure white, apple-like blossoms in early May precede fire engine red, BB-sized berries in late autumn. Meanwhile, deep green summer foliage turns brilliant red in October. All-around, excellent landscape shrub!

Summersweet (*Clethra alnifolia*)

Six feet tall with a four foot spread.

Native to lightly shaded swampy areas all along the Atlantic seaboard. Lightly fragrant spires of white flowers are effective in July and August. Light green foliage turns bright yellow in early October. ‘Hummingbird’ is a smaller form and quite common in nurseries.

Redtwig and Redosier Dogwood (*Cornus alba* and *Cornus serica*)

Eight to ten feet in height with a similar spread.

Often offered as one in the same by nurseries and garden centers because they’re very similar in appearance. *C. alba* is native to China and Korea, while *C. serica* is native right here in Central New York and can be found overrunning abandoned fields and swamps where it thrives in standing water. During the winter months, varieties of these shrubby dogwoods have either red or yellow twigs. During the summer months, again depending upon the variety, the leaves are either solid green or variegated. Please note that these are very large shrubs that do not belong in a foundation planting, where unfortunately they’re often found!

Inkberry (*Ilex glabra*)

Four feet tall and spreading to six feet.

This evergreen holly is native to moist woodlands throughout the northeast. In fact, it’s one of very few evergreens that’s somewhat tolerant of wet soil conditions. Foliage is similar to boxwood but slightly larger. Can be sheared to a formal hedge if desired.

Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*)

Three to twelve feet tall and wide depending upon cultivar.

Native stands of winterberry can be found growing in standing water along the NYS Thruway, I-81 and many country roads throughout Central New York. The foliage of this native shrub is reddish in color as it emerges each spring, turns to dark green through the summer and finishes the season as a pleasing golden-yellow. Highlight of the plant are hundreds (thousands?) of fire engine-red berries that persist until February. Relatively common cultivars include `Sparkleberry` (ten feet tall and wide), `Winter Red` (eight to ten feet tall), `Aurantiaca` (yellow-fruited form that grows ten feet tall and wide), and `Red Sprite` (five feet tall and wide). For fruit production a male variety such as `Southern Gentleman` or `Jim Dandy` (to pollinate `Red Sprite`) should be planted within twenty feet.

Spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*)

Six to twelve feet tall with a similar spread at maturity.

One of the few shrubs that performs well in relatively deep shade, this plant is native to the understory of woodlands and forests throughout Central New York. Upon close inspection, you'll notice clusters of bright, yellow-green flowers in mid-April through early May. Bright red fruits are showy after the yellow foliage drops in late September.

Ninebark (*Physocarpus opulifolius*)

Three to twelve feet tall and wide depending upon cultivar.

Native throughout the Midwestern states in practically every conceivable environment from sun to light shade and bone dry to swampy. Though one of the most adaptable—and difficult to kill—of all shrubs, it's never been particularly popular because of its rather straggly growth habit. However, there are a number of new bronze and purplish-red leaved forms with more refined growth habits that are becoming quite popular. They include `Diablo` (eight to ten feet tall), `Coppertina` (six to eight feet tall), and `Summer Wine` (four to six feet tall). All bear clusters of small, white to light pink flowers in June.

Swamp Azalea (*Rhododendron viscosum*)

Approximately five feet tall with a similar spread at maturity.

This deciduous azalea is native to constantly moist to wet streambanks from Pennsylvania to Georgia. In addition to its tolerance of wet soils, the light, spicy fragrance of this plants white to very light pink flowers makes it an invaluable addition to the landscape from late June through early July. Its leaves turn yellow to orange-red before dropping in mid-autumn.

Willow (*Salix* species)

It's common knowledge that members of the genus *Salix* (i.e., the willows) grow well in a wide range of soils, including those that are constantly wet. One shrubby willow that's become extremely popular over the past five years or so is `Nishiki` willow (*Salix integra* `Hakuro Nishiki`). It grows eight to twelve feet tall and features greenish-white leaves with light pink tips throughout the summer. A second medium-sized shrub willow is the dwarf blue arctic willow (*Salix purpurea* `Nana`). It also grows eight to twelve feet tall and wide and features blue-green summer foliage. Both plants can be very useful by taking up huge amounts of space in wet areas of large properties. Both can be cut back to within a foot of the ground in early spring every couple of years to manage their size.

PERENNIALS, SEDGES, FERNS & GRASSES:**'Golden Variegated' Japanese Sweet Flag (*Acorus gramineus* 'Ogon')**

Rounded mound of grass-like foliage reaches approximately one foot in height with a similar spread.

This low-growing, Asian native thrives in moist to constantly wet soils at the edge of lakes and streams throughout its native range. Its bright green leaves are highlighted by a yellow edge. Winter-tattered foliage can be cut back in early spring. Easily divided in early spring to increase numbers.

Japanese Painted Fern (*Athyrium goeringianum* 'Pictum')

Eighteen inches tall and wide at maturity.

Beautiful and durable small fern. One foot-long fronds are a mixture of light greens and reds to purple. Will spread slowly over several years into areas void of other plants to create an extremely attractive ground cover. Readily available at local garden centers.

'Evergold' Japanese Sedge (*Carex oshimensis* 'Evergold')

Foliage creates mounds that are one two to feet tall and wide after several years.

Similar in appearance to Japanese Hakone Grass (next page), but more mounded in habit. Thrives in full sun to deep shade and damp to wet soils—though not standing water. Once established, it grows relatively well in drier, shaded locations.

Tufted Hair Grass (*Deschampsia caespitosa*)

Foliage creates a one to two foot mound while June-July flower stems may grow to three feet.

Bunch-type grass is found in a wide variety of settings across the northern U.S. and Canada to Alaska. Very useful in restoring wetland habitats. This native grass produce delicate seed panicles in mid-summer on two to three foot long stalks. Very effective when backlit by early morning or late afternoon sunlight. Easily divided in spring. Really stunning when grown in large masses in sunny spots where soils are constantly damp.

Japanese Autumn Fern (*Dryopteris erythrosora*)

Approximately three feet tall and wide after several years.

As with many of the wood ferns this species can tolerate occasionally dry soil conditions. It obtained its name as a result of the reddish-bronze coloration of its emerging foliage each spring. Prefers damp, shady conditions, but will survive occasional drought.

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Variegated Hakonechloa or Japanese Hakone Grass (*Hakonechloa macra* 'Aureola')

Twelve inch-tall mound of foliage.

Excellent ornamental grass for dry to moist, shady locations in any landscape! Delicate-textured, yellow and green-stripped leaves flow over each other creating a pleasing layered effect. Gradually spreads over several years to fill a space two feet in diameter.

Easily divided in early spring.

Rose Mallow or Hardy Hibiscus (*Hibiscus moscheutos*, *H. coccineus* and hybrids)

Four to five tall and spreading three to five feet by late summer.

About five or so different species of this swamp-dwelling native have served as parents for a number of widely available hybrids sporting August to September flowers the size of dinner plates! Cut thick, dead stems to the ground in late winter and be patient, as new growth often doesn't appear until late May or early June! Hybrids include 'Anne Arundel' (pure pink flowers), 'Kopper King' (coppery-red, mapleleaf-like leaves and pinkish-white flowers), 'Old Yella' (pale yellow flowers featuring a bright red center).

Yellow Flag Iris (*Iris pseudoacorus*)

Bright yellow flowers are borne on four-foot stalks in mid- to late June.

Though native to Europe, yellow flag iris has naturalized along waterways throughout the northern U.S. Bright yellow flowers are effective for several weeks in early summer and sword-like foliage offers an ornamental grass-like effect through the remainder of the growing season. Cut foliage to the ground in late fall and divide thick rhizomes in early spring if desired.

Blue Flag Iris (*Iris versicolor*)

Light blue flowers are borne on three-foot stalks in mid- to late June.

Native to Central New York, large swaths of this plant are common along wet streamsides in full sun. Light blue flowers are effective for several weeks in early summer and sword-like foliage offers an ornamental grass-like effect through the remainder of the growing season. Cut foliage to the ground in late fall and divide thick rhizomes in early spring if desired.

Cardinal Flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*)

Low-growing foliage is topped by three to four foot tall flower stalks.

Brilliant carmine-red flowers are effective from late July into early September and are very attractive to hummingbirds. Native to moist woodland edges throughout Central New York. Individual plants tend not to live more than three or four years—especially if soils are allowed to dry out. However, new seedlings almost always replace them providing soils are constantly moist to wet in full sun to light shade.

Ostrich Fern (*Matteuccia struthiopteris*)

Strongly upright fronds two to five feet tall.

Native to wet edges of stream creeks and rivers across the northern U.S. and Canada. In spring, its emerging "fiddleheads" can be harvested, sauteed and served similar to spears of asparagus! Excellent filler for large wet areas in shade to dappled sun where it can be allowed to spread vigorously by underground rhizomes. By late summer the fronds can look pretty shabby if soil is allowed to dry out even a little and can, therefore, be cut to the ground if desired.

Beebalm (Oswego Tea) (*Monarda didyma*)

Two to three feet tall and wide-spreading in moist soils (similar to other members of the mint family).

Native to moist meadows and streamsides throughout Central New York! Clusters of two to three inch-long, tubular white through pink and scarlet flowers are effective from June through July. Flowers are a beacon to bees and hummingbirds! Powdery mildew-resistant cultivars reportedly include 'Marshall's Delight' (bright pink), 'Gardenview Scarlet' (scarlet), 'Sauris' (scarlet), and 'Twins' (dark pink). Can be downright invasive in wet spots, so be prepared to dig up sprouts where you don't want them!

Cinnamon Fern (*Osmunda cinnamomea*)

Approximately five feet tall with a similar spread at maturity.

Native to Central New York, can be seen along NYS Thruway between Syracuse and Utica. Light green, upright foliage reaches three feet in height. Cinnamon-colored, spore-bearing spikes appear in late May through early June. Cut back foliage in late autumn or early spring. Constantly wet soil is important for best growth and even survival of both this plant and Royal fern below.

Royal Fern (*Osmunda regalis*)

Approximately five feet tall with a similar spread at maturity.

Like Cinnamon fern above, native to moist woodlands across much of New York state. Generally considered one of the most vigorous and showy of all garden ferns. Spore-bearing fronds appear golden-brown against deep green foliage in late spring through early summer. Autumn foliage turns bright yellow after a killing frost.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

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