

Great Plants for the Great Plains
By: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator
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When planning landscapes and gardens, it's good to select plants not commonly planted to increase biodiversity. This not only adds to flora (plants) but supports fauna (animals) too. Not to mention making our plantings more interesting.

It's tempting to plant what we see in another person's yard because we know we like it, but if it's commonly planted, this could lead to insect or disease issues. If you really like a plant, go ahead and plant it but try different plants when space allows.

To aid in diverse plant selection, the Nebraska Statewide Arboretum started the Great Plants program. Plants of the year are chosen after being voted on by members of the Nebraska Nursery and Landscape Association. Plants are selected for hardiness, ease of care, aesthetics, and if they add ecological services like supporting pollinators.

Following are the 2024 Great Plants of the year. If you would like to see a list of each year's plants since 1998, for a longer list to choose from, go to <https://go.unl.edu/nsagreatplants>.

The 2024 tree of the year is Shadblow Serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*). This is a small spring blooming tree with edible berries and red to orange fall color. It grows in full sun or filtered shade. While tolerant of many soils, it does best in well-drained, fertile soil. Avoid this tree if you have heavy clay that drains poorly.

Shadblow grows 15 to 20 feet tall and 12 to 15 feet wide. Bird netting is needed if you prefer not to share most of the berries with birds; however, songbirds will be attracted to your yard by this tree. They love the berries and caterpillars this tree supports. Most of which go unnoticed by humans since they are not harmful to the tree.

The evergreen of the year is Japanese White Pine (*Pinus parvifolia*). A 25 to 40 foot tall and 20 to 40 foot wide tree, it does best in full sun with medium moisture. Like most plants, it prefers well drained soil. The needles are three inches long and grow in groups of five.

I have no experience with this pine but we need to add diversity to our evergreens so it would be worth a try. Like many evergreens, it prefers cooler summers and with our extremes in temperatures increasing, hot summers may add stress. Most likely it is susceptible to the same diseases and insect of white pine.

Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos alba*) is the shrub of year. If planted, know it is a suckering shrub that spreads and is often used as groundcover or massed on slopes for erosion control. It is a tough shrub for full sun to part shade and adapted to tough conditions like clay or dry soils and drought.

Snowberry grows 3 to 6 feet tall and wide. It has tiny bell-shaped pink flowers in May or June that readily attract pollinators. Berries are snowy white and cling into winter for added interest. Fruit production is best in full sun locations.

The grass of the year is 'Blackhawks' Blue Stem (*Andropogon gerardii*). This is a new cultivar growing 4 to 5 feet tall and 2 feet wide. In full sun, it has dark green foliage whose tips turn purple in late summer when flowering plumes with reddish-purple seed heads emerge. In early fall, foliage color deepens from purple to almost black by late September. This is a tough native grass adaptable to a variety of soil types.

'Blue Fortune' Hyssop (*Agastache*) is the Great Plants perennial of year. Hyssops are pollinator magnets. Tiny blue tube-shaped flowers grow on spikes atop 3 to 4 foot tall plants that are resistant to deer and rabbits. Flowering lasts at least four weeks in full sun and well drained soils. It is a sterile hybrid resulting from a cross between *A. rugosa* and our native *A. foeniculum*.