

MIDWEST PERMACULTURE

Plant Guild Descriptions

The Seasonal Wet Meadow Guild

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Midwest Permaculture's "Official Plant Guy"

Wet areas following the spring thaw or a heavy rain event are an opportunity to grow species that, in their native habitats, are tolerant of or even thrive in conditions of damp or wet soil.

Willows or *Salix* species are efficient transpirators of water and will help to dry out a site with excess soil moisture. They can be grown in either tree form, such as the common Weeping willow, or as a tall shrub like the pussy willow. Shorter shrub willows growing to a height of 8 feet tall are used for stream bank erosion control and as a source of materials for basketry and garden fencing.

The coppicing of willow shrubs provides material for charcoal production to be used as artist drawing charcoal, fuel, and biochar for carbon sequestration. Scrapings of willow bark are a source of salicylin a natural aspirin painkiller. The spring catkins provide food for birds in spring and the winter buds a food for squirrels. The shrub willows have some shade tolerance.

Viburnums are another species tolerant of wet soils. Heights for them are up to 12 feet tall with an equal spread. The highbush cranberry or *Viburnum triloba* tastes like its name and is a food source for both birds and humans. The nannyberry or *Viburnum lentago* gives a fruit sweet enough to eat right from the bush. All of the Viburnums are shade tolerant.

Dogwoods or *Cornus* species vary in height from the 9-inch-tall bunchberry to the Flowering Dogwood tree at 25 feet tall. The bunchberry or *Cornus canadensis* has a bland tasting berry that is best when eaten with more flavorful fruit. Its redeeming qualities are its 9-inch groundcover height and its ability to grow in the shade of other trees and tall shrubs. Cornelian cherries or *Cornus mas* grow to 10 feet tall and have a tasty berry. Other dogwoods can be used for wildlife plantings for food and cover as well as for basketry and other craft work. Good types for these include *Cornus sericea* and *Cornus sibirica*.

The persimmon tree or *Diospyros virginiana* is a large shrub to medium tree that can grow to a height of 35 feet. Its fruit ripens in autumn and is very astringent until fully ripe. The leaves can be used for tea. When in flower it is a butterfly attractor and the ripe fruit in the fall will attract possums. While in the spring the persimmon has a good tolerance for wet soils, during the summer it does not. The persimmon is best planted towards the outer edges of the wet meadow guild.

Another shrub that does do very well in a wet soil situation is the spicebush or *Lindera benzoin*. It grows to 8-foot tall with an 8-foot spread and attracts the Spicebush Swallowtail butterfly. The spicebush has lemon scented flowers in the early spring before the leaves unfold. The leaves, twigs, and bark can be used to brew an astringent and stimulating tea. During Colonial times the dried fruits minus the seeds were used as a popular substitute for allspice in cooking.

Non woody plants for the seasonal wet meadow include daylily or *Hemerocallis* with edible flower buds, and chufa or *Cyperus esculentus*, a sedge, with edible tubers. Marsh woundwort is both a potherb and a medicinal while turtleheads or *Chelone* species are not only a medicinal herb but a late season attractor of pollinating insects. Apios or groundnuts are a nitrogen fixer and offer an edible rootlet. The blue flag iris or *Iris versicolor* is a medicinal liver tonic and also can be used for a pH solution for soil acidity and alkalinity testing.

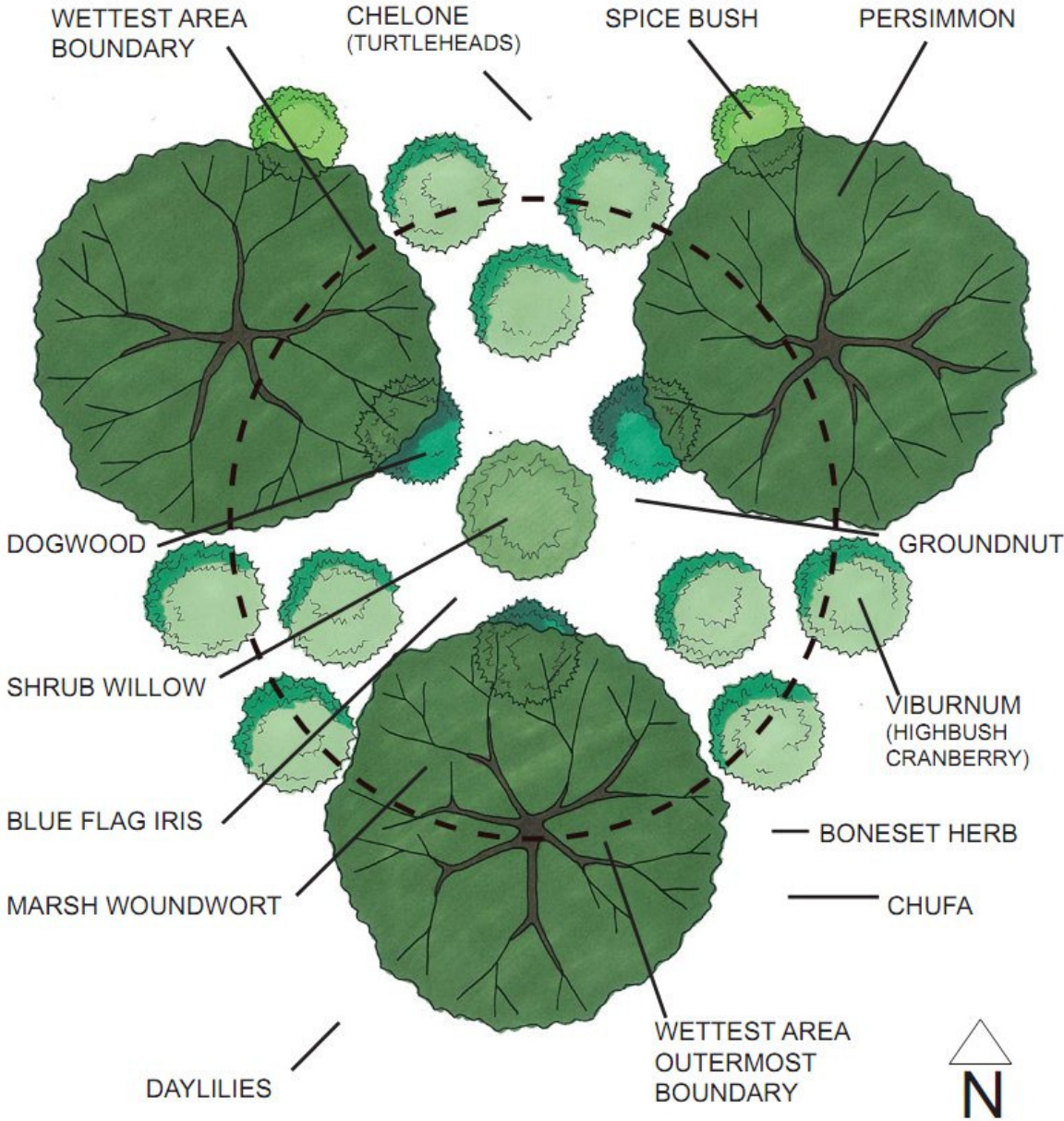
There are many more plants that can be used in these situations. When the low sites in wet meadow hold water throughout the year, except perhaps during times of drought, cattails or *Typha* species are an excellent choice.

The cattail has been called the Wal-Mart of the marsh for the myriad uses that it has. Many of the knotweed species give edible seeds that can be used as flour.

Observe some of the sites in your area and see what sorts of connections that can be made.

WET MEADOW GUILD

DIAMETER TO >



Drawing by Landscape & Permaculture Designer, Jesse Tinges – Fairbury, IL