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Say Yes to Shrubs

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When it comes to plants, many of us are drawn to both the majestic and the delicate. Who doesn't appreciate a huge, centuries-old oak or a colorful display of Solomon's seals? Sometimes we overlook the shrubs, the layer of plants that fall between trees and wildflowers.

I've been thinking of shrubs for a few reasons, one being Commonwealth Edison. Planting a tall tree under a utility line is like arranging for the world's slowest beheading. Sooner or later, that tree will be decapitated.

Small trees and shrubs are the obvious solution to this situation. This begs the question, what's the difference between a small tree and a shrub?

Shrubs vs. Trees

Short answer: not much. A Minnesota botany manual defines a shrub as, "A woody plant usually less than 20 feet high and generally with several stems from a common base." Note the weasel words "generally" and "usually." They are there for a reason.

For example, some trees that have one trunk will often sprout many stems after they have been cut. Basswood is well-known for doing this. So, if you walk through a woods that was logged a decade or so ago, you could see trees looking very much like shrubs.

Also, there are many instances where common shrubs, such as a staghorn sumac, grow far beyond anything usually thought of as a shrub. Here at Stillman we have one isolated sumac stem that looks all the world like a tree-of-heaven.

Realizing that nature has not read our botany books, let's proceed with the definition offered above.

Don't Choke on Cherry

If you're looking for a shrub to go under a power line or to hide some of those unsightly utility boxes, you can't go wrong with Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*). Eighteenth century ornithologist and Rocky Mountain explorer, John Kirk Townsend, wrote the following in 1834, "We found in the mountain passes today a considerable quantity of a small fruit called the choke-cherry, a species of *Prunus*, growing on low bushes. When ripe, they are tolerable eating, somewhat astringent... ordinarily so abundant that it constitutes a large portion of the vegetable food of both Indians and white trappers who visit these regions."

Townsend, most likely, also knew that chokecherry is a major food source for over 100 species of birds and mammals. This probably explains why it can be found growing from the Atlantic to the Pacific and from Mexico to the Arctic Ocean.

Chokecherry can be enjoyed by humans, as Townsend reports, particularly when some sugar is added. Jams, jellies, syrup and wine can be made from the tart chokecherry. Native Americans mixed the fruit with fat and buffalo meat to make pemmican. If you want to try some chokecherries, be careful not to eat the pits. As with other members of the *Prunus* genus, such as plums and peaches, the hard seeds are poisonous.†

The Basics

A chokecherry shrub can grow to a height of about fifteen feet and width of ten feet. It likes full to partial sun, just like you have under a power line. Chokecherry is not too picky about soils. It will tolerate wet or dry conditions and grows in sand or clay.

Its white flowers, which are arranged in spikes that are three to six inches long, bloom in late April and early May. The birds will be seen feeding on the its shiny, translucent, red berries in August. The berries resemble the fruit of one of our delicate wildflowers, false Solomon's seal.

In early autumn, chokecherry's leaves turn a pleasing red-orange. There are scads of cultivated varieties of cherry for sale. I prefer the good old-fashioned "eaten, digested, pooped, and planted by bird" variety, *Prunus virginiana*. One source for native chokecherries is the Possibility Place Nursery in Monee.

With any luck, a bird may have already planted a chokecherry under your electric line. If so, don't be like the apocryphal George Washington and chop it down. Just say yes to this wonderful shrub.

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