

# THE FOREST UNFOLDS

It is a pleasure to watch the forest unfold. Some beautiful trees, like sassafras, tulip, and maples, are quick-growing.

Others, like oaks, hickories, and beeches, are slower-growing and longer-lived. Native shrubs and herbs will appear over time and surprise you.

## Now and Forever

Forests are not just a joy for the present but are also your legacy. A big tree absorbs at least ten times more carbon dioxide from the air than a small tree, so it is helping clean the air and moderate future climate.

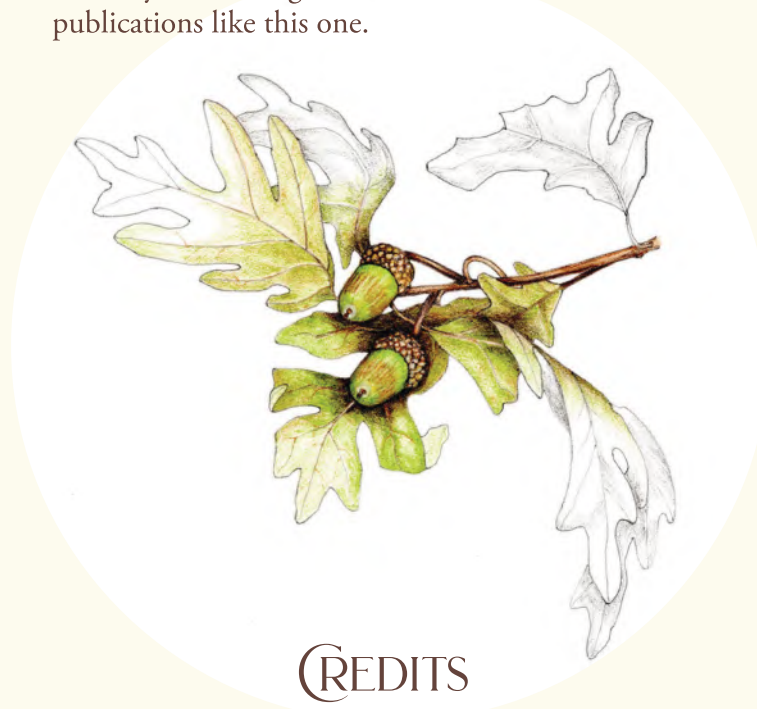
Your trees will sustain wildlife, too. Generations to come will enjoy the beauty and diversity of the forest you started.

Your forest will revive and perpetuate the historic vitality of the land.



## FIND MORE HELP

The Virginia Native Plant Society ([vnps.org](http://vnps.org)) is a source of scientifically based information for everyone in the Commonwealth who cherishes our natural environment. A page on the VNPS website —[vnps.org/piedmont/woodlandbrochure.pdf](http://vnps.org/piedmont/woodlandbrochure.pdf)— lists specific resources that support your plan to bring a forest into your life. There, you will also find a PDF of this brochure to share with neighbors and friends. While visiting the site, please consider becoming a member. Your annual dues and, if possible, contributions help the organization to continue providing fun educational events, year-round guidance, research, and free publications like this one.



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# YOUR YARD WANTS TO BE A FOREST



## WHY A FOREST?

Forests flourished across Virginia  
for thousands of years.  
They will come back,  
if we let them.

Walk into a forest, and you discover gifts. Shade greets you; in the summer it is about 10° cooler. You see a rich network of life, not just tall trees but also understory trees like dogwood, pawpaw, and redbud.

There are shrubs like azalea and spicebush, as well as wildflowers, ferns, vines, and more. Together they form a tapestry of beauty, hold carbon, protect fertility, and prevent erosion.

From birds and mammals to insects and salamanders, the forest offers habitat: food (leaves, pollen, nectar, twigs, insects), homes (holes, roosts), and hiding places.

Did we say beauty?



## What Makes a Forest?

By “forest” we usually mean an area with at least 80% canopy cover. In other words, if you look up in a forest, at most a fifth of what you see is sky. A mosaic of leaves makes rainfall gentler, shattering drops and sending water down the tree trunks. This protects a network of roots, restores the pool of water underground, and keeps soil from washing away. Nuts and other fruits feed a diversity of wildlife. Even dead trees provide food and habitat. Many caterpillars in open meadows need forest trees, like pawpaw, for food.

## Under the Forest

Fallen leaves turn into rich soil. Look beneath the understory: the ground is enriched by decomposing leaves, branches, and tree trunks and teems with life. This soil nourishes wildflowers and ferns, often on a carpet of mosses. This hidden habitat includes fungi that help feed green plants and store carbon. Studies suggest that fungi store even more carbon than trees do.

# THE RIGHT SIZE FOREST FOR YOU

## A Small Lawn

Do you have no trees? Time to begin! You can plant three or four small ones and/or just stop mowing for a season on an unused part of the lawn. Seedlings of native trees might well come up. Group your trees to increase shade and produce litter for nutrients, habitats, and seeds. You can do this on a quarter of an acre or even less, with a few small trees like dogwood, redbud, and hop-hornbeam.

## A Scatter of Trees

Scattered trees with mowed grass underneath offer minimal habitat for your wild neighbors. Is there a corner of your yard where you could stop mowing and add a few trees? Grass doesn't grow well under trees, so why not change the ground cover to native woodland plants, like wild ginger, Christmas fern, or ninebark? This will save tree roots from compaction by mowers. Don't rake the leaves in the fall; they are natural (and free!) mulch, feeding roots and holding moisture. Let them blow around a bit. Just mow them into the grass, and they will feed it, too.

**Limit or avoid herbicides!**

**They will damage the plants you want.**

## A Larger Stand

Look carefully: is your forest floor full of native plants? Or is it covered with nonnative vines and invasive shrubs? If so, start to clean this out. Cut nonnative vines like English ivy and Asiatic bittersweet. Leave the native vines, like Virginia creeper, wild yam, and (away from the house) poison ivy. These provide habitat and berries for wildlife. Cut nonnative shrubs like multiflora rose, and pull invasive herbs like garlic mustard. Limit or avoid herbicides! They will damage the plants you want. Protect young trees from deer. Persimmon, pawpaw, and black walnut trees, which deer dislike, can protect more palatable trees. Now watch how native plants regenerate.

## A Meadow

Are you having trouble keeping shrubs like blackberries and trees like locust and redcedar under control in your meadow? You could let some of it grow into forest. Most forests in the agricultural parts of Virginia originated on abandoned farm fields. Others regenerated after logging. A meadow is usually poised to become a native forest. Your early successional trees, like the redcedar and locust, will be replaced by trees like oaks and hickories, which can live for centuries.

## Edges

The smaller your woodland, the larger the ratio of edge to interior. This encourages damaging vines. A row of native shrubs, such as purple-flowering raspberry, sumacs, or spicebush, can help shade the edge to prevent the influx of invasives. Edge trees are often buffeted by wind, but they also assume beautiful shapes, as large branches grow out toward the sun. Team up with your neighbors to make a larger forest.

## Making It Natural

**For a real forest, not a nursery or timber stand, plant a variety of trees native to your county to match natural patterns. A mix of species encourages forest health by limiting damage should disease or insects attack one. Welcome an understory — once you start your forest, animals will plant more trees, shrubs, and wildflowers.**

