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News Release

Selecting shrubs that can tolerate wet soil

Question: I have an area near my home that I can't seem to get any shrub to live because the soil is poorly drained. I want an evergreen shrub that I can keep fairly short. What would you suggest I try?

Answer: Even during the drought of 2007 I kept telling folks we are more likely to kill plants from too much rather than too little water, but this year has brought that truth home again. Many of the soils we plant into are heavy clay soils that may be poorly drained and downright soggy during parts of the year. If you have this type soil you have three options to consider.

One, raise the planting area by building a small mound 6 – 12" above the existing soil and blend a good topsoil into the upper 6 inches of the existing soil. Two, drain the excess water away from the area with buried perforated pipe – sometimes called a "French drain". Three, choose plants that can tolerate the wet soil. The third option is the option you mentioned and the one I will discuss now.

Actually there are several plants that will grow in your existing soil type. If you like hollies I would suggest either a dwarf yaupon (*Ilex vomitoria*) or a dwarf inkberry (*Ilex glabra*). The yaupon holly will be the easiest to find and two cultivars to look for are "Schillings dwarf" and "Nana". The inkberry holly, like the yaupon, is native to the southeast but is not as common in the nursery trade but certainly a great plant to consider if you can find it. Some dwarf forms to look for are Compacta, Nordic, and Shamrock. The leaves are larger than other dwarf hollies which make for a softer less prickly look. Inkberry has many attributes other than just surviving wet soils. It will grow in full sun to part shade, it can take wet or dry conditions, clay to sandy soils and acid to slightly alkaline pH soils. It is also very easy to transplant or relocate if you decide to move it in the future. It is what folks in the industry call a bullet proof plant. The only down side I can think of is it tends to thin out and shed the lower leaves and branches, but the dwarf forms don't have as much of a problem as the larger cultivars.

Another great native plant to consider is a southern waxmyrtle (*Myrica cerifera*) cultivar named, "Tom's Dwarf". Much like the inkberry holly this plant is tolerant of a wide range of growing conditions including poorly drained soils. Many waxmyrtles have unsightly leaf spots on the foliage but "Tom's Dwarf" has very good resistance and has the added benefit of being a true dwarf that only grows about four feet tall. The standard sized waxmyrtles make a small tree and

are excellent screen or specimen plants in their own right. Waxmyrtles get their name from the fact that early pioneers boiled the berries to harvest wax from the fruit. Only the female waxmyrtle produce these berries, which are also a prized food source for certain birds that can digest the waxy coat.

Lastly, you might consider a St. Johns-wort (*Hypericum densiflorum*) another well adapted native plant. A good selection to consider is “Creel’s Gold Star” or “Brodie” which makes a fairly compact plant in sun to part shade in a wide range of soil conditions. It has the added benefit of a showy yellow bloom in May or June. The disadvantage to this plant is keeping it looking full and dense. The flowers may be dense, hence the name “densiflorum” but the plant needs some light pruning to keep it looking good.

For more information, I highly recommend the book, [Dirr's Trees and Shrubs for Warm Climates: An Illustrated Encyclopedia](#), by Dr. Michael Dirr or please contact Regional Extension Agent Tony Glover at the St. Clair County Extension office at (205) 338-9416 or email gloveta@aces.edu.