



Recommended Planting List



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RESEARCH-BASED RATIONALE

Outdoor spaces in early care and education settings are powerful extensions of the learning environment. Research from the **Natural Learning Initiative (NLI)** and related evidence-based frameworks shows that thoughtfully selected vegetation supports children's *physical health, cognitive development, sensory exploration, and emotional well-being*. Plants are not decorative extras – they are foundational elements of high-quality **Outdoor Play and Learning Environments (OPLEs)**.

WHY ADD VEGETATION?

Vegetation transforms outdoor areas into dynamic spaces that encourage active play, creativity, and discovery. Naturalized environments increase physical activity, reduce stress, support focus, and promote social interaction. Shade from trees allows children to spend more time outdoors safely, while gardens and edible plants connect children to food systems and support healthy eating habits. Exposure to plants also builds early ecological awareness and nurtures a sense of care for living systems.

WHY ARE THESE PLANTS RECOMMENDED?

This planting list is designed specifically for early childhood programs in South Carolina, reflecting regional climate conditions, native ecology, and child-friendly design principles. Recommended plants:

- Provide **sensory experiences** through varied textures, colors, scents, and forms
- Offer **seasonal interest** to support year-round observation and learning
- Serve **functional purposes**, including shade, habitat for pollinators, and opportunities for gardening and nutrition education
- Prioritize **safety, durability, and ease of maintenance** for early childhood settings

Together, these plant selections support engaging, developmentally appropriate outdoor environments that align with best practices promoted by Grow Outdoors South Carolina, its partners, and allied research.

PLANTING CHARACTERISTICS KEY



Shade



Part Sun



Full Sun

Each plant has unique planting requirements, especially when it comes to sunlight. Some plants thrive in full sun (6-8+ hours of direct sunlight), while others prefer partial shade (about 3-6 hours of sun), or even full shade (less than 3 hours of direct sun).



Deciduous



Evergreen

Evergreen plants retain their leaves year-round, providing consistent structure and color, while deciduous plants shed their leaves annually, typically in fall.



Native

Native plants that naturally occur across South Carolina.



Pollinator

Plants that provide pollinators food supporting biodiversity and healthy ecosystems.



Sensory

A sensory plant stimulates one or more of the five senses.



Edible

Parts of this plant are safe and edible for humans, offering learning and tasting opportunities.



Foot Traffic

Durable species that withstand walking, helping protect soil and pathways.

*** Plants shown in pink and marked with an asterisk may not be safe for infants/toddlers. Please avoid using them in infant/toddler spaces or ensure close supervision if they are present.**

TREES

Small (Height: 10-20')

Apple - *Malus domestica*
'Gala', 'Red Delicious' (dwarf rootstock, cross pollination req.)

Fig - *Ficus carica*
'Brown Turkey' (self-fertile) 'Celeste'

Fringe Tree - *Chionanthus virginicus*
'Spring Fleecing', 'Gracy Greybeard'

Jane Magnolia - *Magnolia x soulangeana* 'Jane'
'Ann'

Japanese Plum - *Prunus salicina*
'Methley' (self-fertile)

Pomegranate - *Punica granatum*
'State Fair', 'Nana'

Star Magnolia - *Magnolia stellata*
'Royal Star'

Wax Myrtle - *Myrica cerifera*

Medium (Height: 20-30')

Asian Persimmon - *Diospyros kaki*
'Fuyu'

Crape Myrtle - *Lagerstroemia sp.*
'Natchez', 'Tuscarora', multi-stemmed

Downy Serviceberry - *Amelanchier arborea*
'Autum Brilliance'

Eastern Redbud - *Cercis canadensis*
'Forest Pansy'

Sweet Bay Magnolia - *Magnolia virginiana*
'Wilson'

Tea Olive - *Osmanthus fragrans*

Large (Height: 30'+)

Black Gum - *Nyssa sylvatica*
'Wildfire'

Cabbage Palmetto - *Sabal palmetto*
'Coastal'

Loblolly Pine - *Pinus taeda*

Lighting	Type	Native	Pollinator	Sensory	Edible

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TREES CONTINUED

Large (Height: 30'+)

#	Red Maple - <i>Acer rubrum</i> 'October Glory', 'Red Sunset'
#	River Birch - <i>Betula nigra</i> 'Heritage/Cully', 'Dura Heat', 'Little King'
#	Shumard Oak - <i>Quercus shumardii</i>
#	Southern Magnolia - <i>Magnolia grandiflora</i> 'Brown Beauty', 'Teddy Bear', 'Kay Parris', 'Little Gem'

Lighting	Type	Native	Pollinator	Sensory	Edible

SHRUBS

Small (Dimensions: 2-5')

#	Dwarf Cryptomeria - <i>Cryptomeria japonica</i> 'Globosa Nana', 'Dragon Prince'
#	Glossy Abelia - <i>Abelia x grandiflora</i> 'Edward Goucher', 'Kaleidoscope', 'Twist of Lime', 'Confetti'
#	Lavender - <i>Lavandula sp.</i>
#	Mapleleaf Viburnum - <i>Viburnum acerifolium</i>
#	Rosemary - <i>Salvia rosmarinus</i>
#	Spiraea - <i>Spiraea x bumalda</i>
#	Virginia Sweet Spire - <i>Itea virginica</i> 'Henry's Garnet', 'Little Henry'

Lighting	Type	Native	Pollinator	Sensory	Edible

Medium (Dimensions: 5-10')

#	American Beautyberry - <i>Callicarpa americana</i>
#	Arrowwood Viburnum - <i>Viburnum dentatum</i>
#	*Barberry - <i>Berberis eurybracteata</i> 'Soft Caress' (Alert: berries are a choking hazard)
#	Blackberry - <i>Rubus sp.</i> Thornless variety
#	*Blueberry - <i>Vaccinium sp.</i> (cross pollination req.) 'Premiere', 'Climax' (Alert: berries are a choking hazard)
#	Dwarf Palmetto - <i>Sabal minor</i>

Lighting	Type	Native	Pollinator	Sensory	Edible

SHRUBS CONTINUED

Medium (Dimensions: 5-10')

- # Large Fothergilla - *Fothergilla latifolia*
- # Loropetalum - *Loropetalum chinense* 'Daruma'
- # Oakleaf Hydrangea - *Hydrangea quercifolia*
- # Rose of Sharon - *Hibiscus syriacus*
- # Sweet Pepperbush - *Clethra alnifolia* 'Ruby Spice'

Lighting	Type	Native	Pollinator	Sensory	Edible

Large (Dimensions: 10-15')

- # Banana Shrub - *Magnolia figo*
- # Crimson Bottle Brush - *Melaleuca citrina*
- # Japanese Camellia - *Camellia japonica*
- # Sasanqua Camellia - *Camellia sasanqua*

Lighting	Type	Native	Pollinator	Sensory	Edible

LIVING GROUNDCOVER

- # Bugleweed - *Ajuga reptans*
- # Carolina Clover - *Trifolium carolinianum*
- # Centipede Grass - *Eremochloa ophiuroides*
- # Creeping Phlox - *Phlox subulata*
- # Creeping Thyme - *Thymus serpyllum* 'Pink Chintz'
- # Dwarf Mondo Grass - *Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Nana'
- # St. Augustine Grass - *Stenotaphrum secundatum*
- # Zoysia Grass - *Zoysia japonica*

Lighting	Type	Native	Pollinator	Foot Traffic

PERENNIALS

	Lighting	Type	Native	Pollinator	Sensory	Edible
# Aster - <i>Aster sp.</i> 'Fanny', 'October Skies', 'Woods Purple', 'Woods Pink'						
# Autumn Fern - <i>Dryopteris erythrosora</i>						
# Beebalm - <i>Monarda sp.</i> 'Jacobs Cline'						
# Black-eyed Susan - <i>Rudbeckia sp.</i> 'Goldsturm'						
# Blanket Flower - <i>Gaillardia x grandiflora</i> 'Oranges and Lemons', 'Arizona Sun'						
# Canna Lily - <i>Canna sp.</i>						
# Common Yarrow - <i>Achillea millefolium</i>						
# Cinnamon Fern - <i>Osmundastrum cinnamomeum</i>						
# Daylily - <i>Hemerocallis sp.</i> 'Stella D'Oro', 'Happy Returns', 'Buttered Popcorn'						
# Hosta - <i>Hosta sp.</i> 'Guacamole'						
# Joe Pye Weed - <i>Eutrochium maculatum</i> 'Little Joe'						
# Lamb's Ear - <i>Stachys byzantina</i>						
# *Lily Turf - <i>Liriope muscari</i> 'Variegata' (Alert: berries are a choking hazard)						
# Mum - <i>Chrysanthemum</i> 'Sheffield Pink', 'Country Girl', 'Gethsemane Moonlight'						
# Purple Coneflower - <i>Echinacea sp.</i>						
# Sage - <i>Salvia sp.</i> 'Black and Blue', 'Hot Lips', 'Amistad', 'Mystic Spires'						
# Scarlet Rose Mallow - <i>Hibiscus coccineus</i> 'Alba'						
# Sedge - <i>Carex sp.</i> 'Evergold', 'Everillo', 'Ice Dance'						
# Shasta Daisy - <i>Leucanthemum x superbum</i> 'Becky'						

PERENNIALS CONTINUED

Swamp Sunflower - *Helianthus angustifolius*

Tall Verbena - *Verbena bonariensis*

Tickseed/Bush Daisy - *Coreopsis verticillata*

VINES

Coral Honeysuckle - *Lonicera sempervirens*
'Cedar Lane'

Cross Vine - *Bignonia capreolata*
'Tangerine Beauty'

Lady Banks Rose - *Rosa banksia*

Muscadine Grape - *Vitis rotundifolia*
'Triumph', 'Carlos', 'Noble'

Star Jasmine - *Trachelospermum jasminoides*

ORNAMENTAL GRASSES

Corkscrew Rush - *Juncus effusus*
'Spiralis'

Feather Reed Grass - *Calamagrostis x acutiflora*
'Karl Foerster'

Fountain Grass - *Cenchrus alopecuroides*
'Hameln', 'Karley Rose'

Little Bluestem - *Schizachyrium scoparium*

Muhly Grass - *Muhlenbergia capillaris*

River Oats - *Chasmanthium latifolium*

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LEAD ORGANIZATIONS



**SOUTH CAROLINA
DEPARTMENT OF
PUBLIC HEALTH**

IMPLEMENTATION TEAM



Visit the website for
Grow Outdoors SC

Grow Outdoors SC is a joint initiative of the South Carolina Department of Social Services - Division of Early Care and Education and the South Carolina Department of Public Health - Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity Prevention Section.

This document was developed by the Natural Learning Initiative (NLI) in collaboration with the National Wildlife Federation's ECHO for Grow Outdoors SC to support the implementation of high-quality outdoor play and learning environments in early care and education settings across South Carolina.