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Cultivar James Roof has been selected for tinsel-like blooms that dangle nearly a foot in length



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As a shrub, the coastal silk tassel can reach 8 feet in diameter.

## ASK A MASTER GARDENER

# Native privacy shrubs

**QUESTION:** I am looking for a small shrub or tree to add interest and provide a screen in my garden. I prefer a native. Does anything fit the bill? And is this a good time to plant it?



**Julie Burchstead**  
Master Gardener

**ANSWER:** Fall is a great time to plant trees and shrubs. There is nothing sweeter after relentless days in this oven of summer, days that burned through the last of August with choking smoke, than waking in the rain-washed freshness of a September day.

And September opens a great window for planting trees and shrubs that lasts until the first hard frosts. The milder days give newcomers time to settle into their new beds and establish roots before winter dormancy, giving them a bit of a jumpstart come spring.

You might consider a lovely evergreen native with a unique late winter bloom named coastal silk tassel, *Garrya elliptica*. Scientifically named in 1830 by David Douglas for Nicholas Garry, secretary of The Hudson's Bay Company, it has a history of being eye-catching.

Coastal silk tassel is a quiet but lovely native shrub with a dense, upright growing habit. It can be pruned into a hedge or allowed to become more tree-like in structure. As a shrub it can reach 8 feet in diameter. As a small tree, in ideal conditions, it can stretch 20 or more feet in height.

For those looking for a screen, silk tassel's evergreen leaves, elliptical in shape and leathery in texture, make it an excellent choice.

In late winter, silk tassel steps into the spotlight with its unique cascading catkins. The long-lasting catkins mature into clusters of small purplish-gray, berry-like fruit that ripens in summer (if not eaten by birds). Male plants of this dioecious species produce longer, more showy catkins.

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Silk tassel loves sun in coastal climates, but in our increasingly hot Douglas County summers, it appreciates some shade. This native shrub is tough. I have two planted in shady areas of my yard. Though allegedly bitter and not a first choice for foraging, one of mine was severely pruned by deer in its first year. It now has a more shrub-like structure, but is thriving.

Silk tassel is not picky about soil – as long as it is well-drained – and needs only a moderate amount of water, becoming increasingly drought tolerant in maturity.

Some sources note silk tassel as being fast growing. I have not found that to be my experience yet, though perhaps it just needs time to settle in. The first two years, my gallon-sized starts grew little, even the one protected from deer. But this spring and summer, both added over a foot in height.

It could be too, that a sunnier location would promote faster growth. Like rhododendrons, however, silk tassel can be prone to leaf scorch with too much hot direct sun.

Small trees and shrubs like silk tassel fill many roles in the garden. They provide structure and focal points. They add habitat for birds, shade for smaller plants around their base, and they can also help create screens and privacy.

Though their blooms may be less showy than more common perennials and annuals found in many gardens, they often provide interest around the edges of seasons. Early bloomers, like silk tassel, provide critical food to pollinators when not much else is available. Though wind-pollinated, silk tassel produces an abundance of pollen attractive to bees.

Additionally, native shrubs are an important part of natural habitats and are rarely replaced when forests are harvested. There is growing concern that the loss of these understory plants is a contributor to the decreases currently documented in the numbers of beneficial insects and birds.

When we add native shrubs to our yards, we support more than just aesthetic appeal. Garden by garden, we are restoring critical habitat as well. If you are thinking about adding understory to your garden this fall, coastal silk tassel is definitely one to consider.

*Do you have a gardening or insect question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu) or 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 S E Douglas Ave., Roseburg. Douglas County Master Gardeners are trained volunteers who help the OSU Extension Service serve the people of Douglas County.*

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