

Plants in Your Forest

Forest plants play a role in interpreting a forest's history, current condition, and potential for meeting your goals for your forest. It's not only the trees, but the plants beneath the trees, that have a significant influence the potential of your forest.



Montana forests are very diverse and are influenced by not only regional and local climatic and environmental variables, but also by past management. In your packet are two publications that will be of great value to you for recognizing the plants on your forest: *Important Plants that Every Forest Steward Should Know* and *Trees and Shurbs of Montana Forests*.

During the workshop you will learn how to categorize plants into one of five categories: trees, shrubs, forbs, grasses, and rushes/sedges/other. This distinction will help you to understand their function, that is, the role the plant plays in the forest. Think about the plants around your home. Trees on the west side of a house function as shade producers. Shrubs and annuals in the front may function as a screen or simply provide aesthetics appeal. You will also learn to recognize the function of forest plants. They may provide food or cover for wildlife, ground cover to work as a filter for water, or provide the beginnings of a forest that will grow to maturity over the next 100 years.

In the publications you will find the word forage, a term applied to grasses and wildflowers that livestock and certain wildlife species use for food. Some descriptive terms for forage you will hear during the workshop include *preferred*, *desirable*, and *undesirable*.

Preferred: a plant that is highly favored and quickly eaten by animals, generally has a high forage value.

Desirable: a plant that is moderately favored and eaten to a moderate degree generally has a moderate forage value.

Undesirable: a plant that is **not** favored and normally not eaten or eaten only after everything else is gone, generally has a low forage value.

Other terms you will hear are *increasers*, *decreasers*, and *invaders*.

Increaser: a plant that increases in number, in response to heavy grazing pressure, over an extended period of time. Many increasers are undesirable forage plants.

Decreaser: a plant that declines in number in response to heavy grazing pressure over an extended period of time. Decreasers are typically preferred plants that are repeatedly grazed until they weaken and die.

Invader: a plant that is similar to an increaser. It increases in response to grazing and disturbance. However, it is more closely linked to noxious weed species that *invade* heavily disturbed sites.

These terms will become important to you as you develop your objectives and determine what plants you have on your property and how you want to manage them.

FOR THE WORKSHOP

It is important to recognize how each plant interacts with other plants, wildlife, range, water, and other resources. For example, is elk sedge a favorite food of elk or livestock? What parts of the plant do they eat? Does the plant control erosion? Why or why not? How does it affect tree seedling establishment? What type of environment is it most likely to be found? Learning to recognize and identify plants on your property will help you determine which parts of the property are best suited to meet your ownership goals. To find some answers to these questions refer to the two plant guides provided to help you understand how forest plants interact or react with wildlife, other plants, livestock, fire, weeds, and timber harvesting.

YOUR TASK: Try to collect and bring to class an example of a plant from each of the five categories of plants (tree, shrubs, forbs, grasses, other). Look for plants you cannot identify and focus on those most common. If you cannot get to your forestland before the workshop, don't worry. We will have plenty of plants in class.

If you are bringing plants to the workshop use a plastic bag and wet paper towel, collect as much of the plant as possible (roots, twigs, flower, leaves, cones). Describe the general characteristics of the site such as wet or sunny. Use care to not collect rare plants. If there is only one or only a few plants try to take a photo of the plant. We will help you identify as many plants as possible in class.

During the break between the second and last day of the workshop you will be doing an inventory of your forest. If you start becoming familiar with the common plants and trees on your forest now, it will be a benefit to you when you do your inventory.